

Relate, Relative, Relationship

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Relate, Relative, Relationship

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May 4, 2007

Table of Contents

Dedication	Page 3
Introduction	Pages 4-8
“I Told You So”	Pages 9-22
“Degrees of Separation”	Pages 23-60
“Shark Attack”	Pages 61-101

Dedication

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my advisor Dr. Susan Michalczyk, for her unrelenting support and patience throughout the year. I had not expected that writing a thesis would be as challenging as it was this year and I am grateful to have had an advisor who always understood whenever an unexpected obstacle surfaced. Thank you for every advice and comment you offered to improve my writing.

I also thank my friends and family who had to hear every single complaint and had to bear reading multiple revisions of each story. You are my constant source of inspiration and of encouragement. Thank you for your criticisms, your advice, and your red pens.

Introduction

Isaac Newton's third Law of Motion states that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." When things collide, there is an immutable effect on both the initiator and the reactor. In the same way, people are in constant motion, "colliding" with one another and irrevocably changing in the process.

It was only when I had to live on my own at Boston College that I realized how much the people in my life had such a powerful influence in my life. They are the ones who guided me to evolve into the person I am today. Swayed by my scientific background, I had always believed that I was mostly predestined by my genetic makeup: who I will ultimately become was written in my DNA from conception. However, living in a suite with seven other women and developing close relationships with people who were so unique made me question everything: my beliefs, my approach, my reactions, my opinions. I had never lived with a roommate; I never had to see my friends all hours of the day, everyday; I never had such a close group of girlfriends who all have such distinct personalities. I began to realize that it was mostly my environment and not my DNA that had the greatest impact on my growth into an adult. At first, it was difficult having to adjust and to compromise to my surroundings. I was constantly challenged to look at every issue and situation at a different angle. As clichéd as it sounds, college was a time of transformation, of questioning, of discovery, and of identification. Such a significant experience influenced what I wanted to address in my thesis: the inescapable changes brought upon by interactions with others.

In presenting these narratives about relationships, I struggled with the form and the style in which they would be written. I had to learn how to take more risks, to go beyond certain patterns of writing with which I had become too comfortable. There was a certain formula that my fiction writing seemed to follow: the protagonist struggles with a dramatic problem, which is eventually overcome with the help of close friends and family. The story always ended on a happy note, with a clear resolution and a moral to be learned from the temporary struggle. With this thesis, I wanted to break free of the mold that had constricted my creativity by exploring a more realistic plot in a novel way. Life, I have learned, cannot be tied neatly with an ending where the just and the moral emerge as the victor; there are things that cannot be reconciled, even in retrospect. The characters in the stories deal with events in their lives that are a result of the culmination of their actions and the actions of those around them. Their present must be dealt with in accordance with what had led to that point, whether they deserved certain consequences or not.

Portraying this view proved especially difficult as I explored ways to construct the narrative in the most poignant and effective way possible. I wanted to challenge myself as a writer to go beyond the form of simply telling a story from start to finish. In the end, I decided to give the reader discrete pieces of information in the form of memories, of newspaper clippings, of diary entries, of telephone conversations. The audience is held responsible for piecing the facts together and then for deciding with whom they sympathize, if they decide to do so at all. This way of presenting information is the way people must make judgments in life about those around them: people are given pieces of other's lives through conversations and through other sources. They are left the tools to understand a little bit better, why people are the way they are. With experimentation and with the encouragement of my friends, my classmates, my family and

my professors, I was finally able to step out of the confines of my own self-constructed boundaries.

A great deal of background reading and research also contributed to the attempt to preserve authenticity in the emotions and the events I wanted to portray. I feared that writing about experiences that I had not yet gone through would distance the reader from the stories, him or her able to see that the events occurring in the short stories were not personally felt. I had never experienced the death of a close relative or of a friend; I had never had an estranged relationship with my parents; I had never been in a situation that is as painful as dealing with sexual harassment. Reading works that described personal encounters with death and with pain gave me a deeper understanding of how this can be world-shattering: Without by Donald Hall, Everyman by Philip Roth, The Father by Sharon Olds, and “Bodies in Waiting” from Lost Bodies by Laura Tanner. Whenever I had an insurmountable writer’s block, Janet Burroway’s Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft offered freewrite exercises, examples of revered writing, and practical suggestions in developing a character, the plot, the setting, etc. The culmination of the classes I had taken at Boston College and of the books I had read while a student here have probably shaped my writing more than I can consciously recognize.

The first chapter is a personal experience I had with my mother in dealing with the cultural and language barriers we had to face. A great deal of our misunderstandings arose because I was the first generation in my family to be born in America and to pursue a higher education at college. Many children come to a point when they rebel against everything their parents tell them to do because they do not understand why their parents do and say the things they do. It is only after the child and the parents can come to a mutual comprehension of each other that steps can be made toward building a stronger relationship, a relationship that goes beyond the simple acts of obedience – or rebellion – and of giving commands. My parents had

immigrated to America in their early twenties in pursuit of better opportunities for their future. It was not until I was older and when my relationship with my mother had deepened that I could begin to comprehend her side of the story, her journey, her past which had influenced her decisions that she had made for her children. In order to recount this experience creatively, pieces of conversations that I had with my mother are woven throughout my scenes and my mother's scenes, which, in their stark contrast, causes a palpable tension. Being able to recount the memories in retrospect gives the ability to compare each experience and to reach an understanding.

The second chapter is an exploration of the ripple effect amongst strangers and how individuals are all connected in one way or another. Our influences are felt by those around us, even though we may not be directly connected with them. Opening with a dramatic scene, the reader is taken sequentially backwards in time, tracing the steps that the seemingly unconnected characters had taken, ultimately understanding the woman's motivation. Each individual's secrets and conditions all culminate into that moment where one person tries to take her own life. It is rarely one isolated moment that triggers action. Like a snowball that rolls down a hill, increasing its speed and its size over time, various facets of one's life and of other's lives collect together to produce a bigger consequence of which one is aware.

The concluding chapter of this series explores the fictional world of a family dealing with the repercussions of their past actions. Each individual's decisions had ramifications for the rest of the family, which they struggle to deal with years later. Characters face guilt, anger, bitterness, and responsibility, as they are constantly reminded of the day when their lives came crashing down. Instead of telling these characters' story by starting from the past and proceeding to the present in chronological order, I decided to include pieces of information and

scenes from their memories for the reader to piece together. In the end, the reader is left with having to make a decision: with whom will he or she ultimately sympathize? Will he or she even make that choice?

This comprehensive and tedious project provided many obstacles and tensions throughout the year, but it was a journey and a journey worth taking. Before this year, I was never afforded the opportunity to pursue a goal I had set for myself after watching “A Walk to Remember” in high school: to write a novel. It has been rewarding to see the end product of constant revisions, of constant criticisms, and of constant growth.

CHAPTER 1

"I Told You So"

"A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity; it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

-- Agatha Christie

"Children are the sum of what mothers contribute to their lives."

-- Unknown

**** PART I ****

She runs her fingers over the rice paper doors one last time, trying to remember every detail of the house in which she had spent the bulk of her childhood and adolescence. She takes in the bare, yellowed walls as the slideshow of images from her past plays in her mind's eye: chaotic family dinners, the food given by the community as a sign of thanks to their pastor and also grown in the garden that they had planted in the backyard, Mom always ready with a small after-school platter of fruit, raising the chickens, sleeping on the floor with all of her sisters in one room, raw hands from washing the endless mound of laundry accumulated from seven bodies crammed into one house. The summer sun illuminates the dust particles suspended in the air, stopping the time for just a moment when she can stand in the now-silent house by herself, the house that had never known a moment of silence in the two decades that her family had lived there. She grabs the last box from the floor, slides the door closed for the last time and steps out into the glaring August sun and into the dusty courtyard, loading the box into the truck, her recently-earned high school diploma resting on top of all the odds and ends from her room. She climbs into the backseat with her older brothers and sisters; she takes a final look at the house disappearing behind the cloud of dirt that the wheels have kicked up. She abruptly sits forward and stares straight ahead.

“Back then, a life in America was full of promise, of a better future; staying in Korea didn’t offer the same opportunities. I wanted to go to school, make money, learn English... start a family. I just couldn’t wait.”

“Are you sure you were that excited? I would have been so scared of starting my life over in a country where I barely knew the language or the culture; all I’ve ever had to do was move towns and that was hard enough. All of your friends, your family, your life was in Korea.”

“No, I was sure. I never looked back. I never had any regrets.”

* * * * *

She has bags under her blood-shot eyes, each scarlet blood vessel branching out over the white surface, any remaining energy spent in vain trying to stay awake through the morning lectures at Middlesex County College. As the professor’s monotonous voice travels in even waves through the dense air of the warm classroom, her eyelids fill with lead, threatening to close if she dares to let go for even a second. She takes another gulp of her coffee, pinches her arm and sits up straighter to stay awake.

The night before, mere hours before class, she had donned the customary blue cotton robe and mesh hairnet to shove cheap, plastic toys into cheap, plastic bags; pick up, stuff, set down, pick up, stuff, set down... Nine hours of repetitive motion later, she drags her swollen feet back home to study for a few hours before going to bed at 4:00am. It has been a week since working there, balancing school and work; sleep was an expensive commodity, a precious three hours each day, before the sun would interrupt her brief repose to start the day again.

The second hand drags its heavy arm with a dull tick, slowly dragging the mornings and the afternoons as she tries to shake the feeling of being unprepared for each class.

“I knew that I could do so much better in my classes if I actually had the time to study and focus on my schoolwork. Why do you think I push you so hard in school? There just wasn’t enough time in the day for me to work, to study, to eat, to sleep; I never want you to go through what I had to just to get an education.”

When the time finally reaches 3:00pm, she sprints out of class, her cheap tennis shoes pounding rhythmically on the cement sidewalk, toward her used, gray Honda. To her delight, the ignition starts at the first attempt and she races against time as she flies home, enjoying the one free hour in her day. The cool September sun shines brilliantly behind several wispy clouds suspended within an endless pool of a crisp blue sky. She pulls up the driveway of the blue-gray house with navy shutters and chipping paint, its white-painted iron fence surrounding three sides of the house the only distinctive marker in a neighborhood of mass-produced houses from the same company. Saying a quick hello to her mother and her currently-unemployed siblings, she grabs a banana and shoves it into her mouth. Her mom motions for her to sit down and to eat the rice platter that she had prepared with a clear beef soup.

“Mom, I only have twenty minutes to get ready for work. I’ll eat it later; could you just stick it in the refrigerator for me? Thank you!” She gives her mom a quick kiss on the cheek and runs upstairs to the room she shares with her two older sisters to change into her uniform. As she yanks the gray, linen collared shirt over her head, she wistfully looks at her oldest sister’s nurse uniform hanging in the closet, recently dry-cleaned and pressed. She shakes the burst of jealousy and grabs her purse as she runs out of the house.

She pulls up to the dismal concrete building; she cuts the engine and rests her head on the soft, gray headrest, closing her eyes and feeling her chest breathe for a minute before she heads toward the steel, prison-like double doors. Before she can get farther than the lobby area, she is stopped by her beady-eyed boss.

“I’m sorry but I’m going to have to let you go,” the heavysset boss huffs, holding out a white envelope containing her last check from the past two weeks.

“I do not understand. I do something wrong?” She asks in her broken English.

“I just have to let a whole lot of you guys go. There’s not enough money around here.”

She turns and walks with her head down back to her car.

By the next week, she has found another job at the envelope factory, producing thousands of custom made envelopes for big-money corporations. She is back at the same routine of work, school, sleep, work, school, sleep... The monotonous cycle wears at her energy, dulling her determination to make a successful living in America.

* * * * *

She is at the church where her father is the senior pastor; he has finally gotten a job at a local church. The white, wooden chapel is empty; the congregants are all eating their Korean lunch prepared by various women in the church, the red, velvet seats still emanating the warmth of its previous occupants. Near the front of the chapel, resting peacefully in the left-hand corner by the pews reserved for the choir is the black Steinway grand piano. This is the only time when

she can get some peace, some rest, some time alone with the beloved piano. She sits down on the plush leather stool with a sigh and gently passes her hands over the smooth, cool ivory and the shiny black keys.

“I wish I could have had piano lessons; it was always been a dream of mine. My older sister was the only one who could get lessons... there just wasn’t enough money to get down to me since I was the youngest. Only the rich kids could afford to have pianos and lessons.”

She tinkers out the notes of her favorite hymn, each slightly awkward motion beautiful music to her parched ears. The song resonates in the empty, white chapel where a tired Asian woman sits entranced by her piano’s gift of music.

* * * * *

She hurries out of her seat as soon as the professor had concluded the class with his usual “See you next time”; she walks over to the table where the exams are being handed out.

“I got a C+. I usually got mostly B’s, sometimes A’s. I’m not dumb. It’s just that English was just so hard; what I had learned in Korea just didn’t help with conversations or papers or understanding what the professor was teaching; they all spoke too fast.”

She shoves the source of disappointment deep into her backpack and heads back home to change for work. The fluorescent sign announcing Benihana’s presence suddenly appears in

between two overgrown, forest-green bushes, the restaurant in the shape of an old-fashioned Japanese house with black ceramic roof tiles. Tucking in and smoothing her freshly-pressed button down shirt, she takes her place behind the receptionist podium and waits for the eager, hungry families. The phone beside the stand rings. She picks it up and answers with the customary, “Benihana, how may I help you?”

“Yes, I am coming from Bridgewater. Which way would be the fastest way there?”

“Uh... hold on one minute please.”

She covers the mouth of the phone, waves at the nearest waiter walking past her, and asks, “Can you talk please?” while pointing at the phone. Five hours later, she gathers her things in the employee locker room and pauses before the bulletin board where the employee hours for the week are posted.

“My hours had been cut a lot all of a sudden. I needed to work more because I needed the money to pay for gas, for school, for my parents, for spending money, for food... No one was there to give me an allowance or to pay for my education. My older brother was in school trying to get his Ph.D, my sister was getting married soon, and my other siblings were trying to establish themselves in this country.”

The manager walks in, his tiny frame lost within the extra fabric of his ill-fitting suit; he catches her before the schedule, her face etched with the soft lines from her furrowed eyebrows.

“I’m sorry but I had to cut back your hours. You cannot even communicate with our customers beyond making the simple reservations. I’m sorry.” Without another word he

abruptly turns around and leaves the room. As tears begin pooling in her eyes, she closes her locker for the very last time. As she drives home, she stops by a familiar McDonald's.

“What I really wanted was a vanilla milkshake, which is still by far my favorite, but I didn't want to try to order it anymore because no one could ever understand my pronunciation. If I was lucky, there would be a picture of it on the menu so I just pointed at it; if there wasn't, then I had to order strawberry or chocolate. Chocolate is the worst flavor; I hate chocolate milkshakes.”

“Suh-traw-beh-ree milkshake please.” She tries to swallow the thick milkshake, its viscosity difficult to surpass the lump in her throat. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and faces forward, driving home to cram all of her studying in as few hours as possible so that she can get at least four hours of sleep for another day.

* * * * *

**** PART II ****

I circle my bedroom for the last time, allowing the rays of sun heat my freckled, twelve-year-old face, in the spot where my bed used to stand. I close my eyes and picture the past seven years or so of memories stored in this familiar room: the days spent reading through the massive pile of books borrowed from the public library, the “lessons” I forced my brother and my cousin

to learn using my chalkboard easel, the numerous long distance phone calls to my best friends, the sunny afternoons spent making mix tapes from my favorite radio station 103.5 KTU, the white, mesh canopy protecting me from ghosts as I slept peacefully in a cave of floral down blankets. For the last time, I walk out the door and close it, its soft thud resounding throughout the empty house. Skipping down the stairs, I lock the front door for the very last time, the door to which I had picked the lock numerous times whenever I forgot the key, the door that opened the way to the rooms where precious glimpses of my past were stored. As we ride off, I look back at the townhouse that had been the hub of my childhood until it is no longer visible.

“I was so excited to leave Edison because the room was getting too small, remember? I knew I was going to miss my friends, but I wasn’t scared of getting settled in Westfield.”

“You don’t know how much I wanted my own house. I hated having to call the super every time something broke, the place wasn’t very clean, the neighbors always complained whenever we made a little noise... I was glad to leave that townhouse even though a lot of growing had occurred there.”

* * * * *

It’s 10:00pm and I’m still at the library. My vision blears, the salty tears stinging my dehydrated eyes, as I finally look up to see that no one else is left at the wooden tables. The more I study, the more the tension in my head tightens to a painful pressure, the more my hands

want to rip the glossy pages and burn them; this test is going to be too hard. The diagrams, the figures, the formulas, the bolded words swirl together on the open page of my AP Biology book.

“Why did I have to take that class anyway? Why does everyone expect me to be a doctor? Why am I expected to be the first at Harvard or Princeton? That class was a lot to handle with every other AP class I took that year.”

I return to the book and write out notes as I highlight, underline, and memorize the hundreds of pages.

* * * * *

I sit pounding out each note of Mozart’s piece, each motion a hateful, forced movement. The piano teacher stands behind me, clapping out the quick beat of the concerto.

“I hated this teacher so much! I had hated her since the day I started receiving lessons from her. She hit my hand every time my posture was incorrect, every time my wrists began to droop, every time a wrong note was played.”

The beat is too fast and my mind races to keep up with the piece, my brain threatening to quit before the last measure has been played; the white and black keys of the Yamaha poses to eat my hands whole with its fangs, mocking my attempt to maintain the quick pace. My fingers are sore and because I hadn’t cut my nails, they keep getting stuck in-between the keys, bending

in painful directions. With a strained smile plastered on my tense face, I continue to play until the hour-long lesson is over.

I had started playing when I was in kindergarten, not out of free will, but by the forceful hand of my mother.

“MOM, I HATE PIANO!! WHY ARE YOU MAKING ME PLAY WHEN I DON’T WANT TO?!” I shout until my face is scarlet and my six-year-old voice is hoarse. She silently walks over to the piano, closes the lid, and locks it shut. She picks up my piano books, makes her way across the room in a frighteningly calm pace, and drops the books into the garbage can. The soft thud from the impact echoes throughout the room, engulfed in the thick silence. “If you don’t want to play anymore, then fine. Quit. I am not going to waste my money anymore on you.” Tears stream down my face.

* * * * *

I step off the yellow school bus, jumping at the last step, always a bit too high from the ground. It was the end of another long marking period, thank goodness; finally, the slate is wiped clean: new chapters are beginning, new topics discussed, new notebooks used. I walk with my neighbors Lauren and Leigh-Mary back home, softly exhaling as we climb up the steep hill. Ignoring the quiet pants as we lug our heavy backpacks, I breathe in the crisp air, craving an apple and dreading the leaves I would have to rake when I got home.

“I thought I had done pretty well that marking period. I had to work harder for my grades since my teachers that year were so hard; they were the toughest graders in the school and I had never failed to complete an assignment like other kids.”

“Hey Mom! I’m home!” I enter the house while absentmindedly flipping through the mail that was resting on the foyer marble table. “Mom! Where are you?”

“In my closet! I can’t seem to find something...” her muffled voice made its way through the stairs, where I was taking my shoes off.

“Guess what? I got my report card today.” I climb the seven wooden steps to get up to her room at the end of the hallway.

“And how’d you do? Straight A’s?” I can see her rummaging through boxes filled with odds and ends while sitting on the floor of her closet. Her expectant face turns to me.

“Mmmm... not quite this time. I got a B in Physics; that teacher is ridiculously hard. He even had to curve the grades. I was between an A- and a B+, but I didn’t do that well on the last test...” My voice trails off and my eyes drop to the ground as I wait. Her expressions always betray her emotions before her mind can finish formulating the disappointed words to say in response.

“A ‘B’? On your report card? Aren’t colleges going to see this? What happened to getting straight A’s? Didn’t you study enough? I don’t know what your dad’s going to say but we’ll talk later.”

I turn and walk out of the room silently. I climb the extra flight of hardwood stairs, my feet making soft creaks sound throughout the hallways, until I reach my room. “Dare to be

different!” shouts at me from my penguin poster proudly decorated on my door. I keep the lights off, place my backpack at the foot of my bed, walk into my closet, and lie down on the rugs and pillows I had put there for times like this and cry myself to sleep.

Several hours later, my father returns home, the sound of the garage opening always a warning sign for the oncoming storm. I walk down the stairs with heavy feet; avoiding him would spell out more trouble since he hates it when his children don’t acknowledge his homecoming everyday.

“Hey Dad,” I mumble, avoiding his gaze.

“You and I need to talk,” he responds with an emotionless voice, the voice that means that I’m in “deep trouble”. *Oh crap. Here we go.* He sits down at the kitchen table, pulling up the sleeves of his fleece pullover, signifying that this conversation will not be a short one. “What happened in Physics? I was so good at physics when I was in high school. All you have to do is study hard enough and you can get an ‘A.’ I thought you said that everything was fine in your classes. A ‘B’ doesn’t mean you’re fine. If you needed extra help, you should have stayed after school and asked for it.”

“I thought I was doing OK. I had gotten A’s on the two lab reports we had to hand in. I guess I didn’t do so well on the test,” I whisper, the tears threatening to overflow.

“Are you watching too much TV again? Do you need to be grounded? Yuh-bo (wife), make sure she doesn’t talk on the phone for a week. She needs to study harder to make up for this grade.” My mother silently nods in assent, scooping out the rice into separate bowls.

“Why do you guys never appreciate all the work I do? Can’t you see how hard I’m studying? What more do I have to do to prove it to you? You *never* acknowledge all the A’s

that I get! Did you know that my other friends get *money* for every ‘A’ that they get? Their parents actually reward them for good work. All you guys do is *punish!*” The tears flow steadily into my mouth as I lower my eyes after this outburst. I cannot believe I actually talked back to my parents. I refuse to look up to see my parents’ reactions.

* * * * *

**** PART III ****

“Mom, do you realize how hard you guys pushed me? It was so intense that my friends even made fun of me about it.”

“Daughter, I just want you to have everything I couldn’t have.”

“Do you wish you could go back to school? Why don’t you just do it? People go back really late these days.”

“No. It’s too late for me. I always wished I could be a doctor; I think I would have been really good at it, but it’s OK. As long as I can provide for you now, that’s all that matters.”

“I know. I know, Mom. I can understand now why you did all that.”

“I told you so.”

CHAPTER 2

“Degrees of Separation”

*"Every single person has at least one secret that would break your heart.
If we could just remember this, there would be a lot more compassion, understanding and
tolerance in the world."
-- PostSecret*

Monday, April 7, 2006

Annie Lennox, High School English Teacher, Age 25

The paramedics say that I hadn't been breathing for several minutes before my heart started beating again. They don't know why it did. They keep calling it a "miracle." Some miracle. They had been ready to give up when David, out of hopeless desperation, pounded my chest with a forceful fist for the last time. Then he checked for a pulse on my wrist. He couldn't check the artery in my neck because that's where all the damage was. And there it was. My pulse, a weak rhythmic pulsation bringing life back into my body.

If they had known me at all, I doubt they would have tried so hard to save me. I wish they had given up sooner. I wish Michelle had found me a minute later, dialed 911 a minute later. One more minute, just one more, and I would have been free.

Monday, April 6, 2006

Steve Ray, First-year Medical Student, Age 23

The gurney had barely touched the ground when a team of gowned doctors received it with eager and trained hands.

“25-year-old female. Suicide attempt. Tried to hang herself with an industrial rope. Manual CPR for four minutes before weak pulse detected. BP 75 over 50. Oh-two stat at 88. Danger of hypoxia. Central IV started.” A paramedic gave these numbers at a steady rhythm as another freckled red-haired EMT continued to squeeze a large plastic bulb with a constant regularity over the patient’s lifeless mouth.

Trailing behind the huddled group that had picked its pace to a jog was an ashen young woman tentatively placing one pointed foot out of the ambulance, testing the height as if it was hot water drawn for a bath, before jumping off. Clutching her purse close to her body, her eyes were fixated on the gurney that was being pushed into the depths of the hospital. As the thin ivory gowns caught every small breeze and the caps leaned collectively over the still body, the mobile unit caught the resemblance of a runaway bride’s veil.

The woman, clad in a beige cable knit sweater and brown tweed trousers, slowly picked up her pace until she had jogged into the emergency room.

“Miss. Miss? Miss!” A nurse waved a clipboard at her, the pen attached to the head swinging with each jerky motion. “Please. I know this is difficult, but you need to fill some forms out for your friend that just came in. You can go in to see her after the doctors get her stabilized and after they have more information.”

The woman absentmindedly took the clipboard from the nurse's hand but continued to walk toward the swinging double doors where her friend had disappeared.

"Miss! You can't go in there! Please sit over there and wait until a doctor comes out to speak with you. Fill out the forms in the meantime." The nurse had firmly guided the woman to a chair near the plastic fern plant that was straddled by end tables overflowing with outdated magazines. "Steve! Could you give me a hand here?" Waving at a nearby young man wearing a navy blue smock, the nurse helped the woman sit down.

"Sure. What's up?" Steve walked over with his easy gait, looking curiously at the woman staring at her hands, which were still balled into tight fists around the leather straps of her purse.

"She's still in shock. Her friend was just taken into the ER. Could you just stay with her and make sure she's ok?"

"Of course! Glad to."

"Miss, this is Steve. He's a volunteer at the hospital and will be here for you. If you need anything, water, coffee, anything, feel free to ask him, ok?" The nurse patted the woman's hands gently before returning to her station.

Steve sat down in the chair next to the shocked woman. She was still holding onto her purse with the clipboard balancing precariously on her thighs. "Would you like anything? Something to drink? An old magazine? If you don't want to fill the forms out right now, it's ok. You can fill them out later when you're ready. Let me just hold that for you." As he went to grab the clipboard before it made its plummet to the ground, he noticed a streak of a viscous, rusty-red liquid crawling its way down her legs.

Monday, April 7, 2006

David Lewis, College Senior, EMT Volunteer, Age 22

The sunlight glared through the dirty windshield, its rays diffusing through the dried spots from the rain that had fallen the night before. Surrounding both sides of the asphalt highway, the ancient trees provided a stark contrast to the piercingly clear blue sky. Janet stuck a tanned, freckled hand out the window and absentmindedly grasped at the air flowing past her and gently caressing her skin. Her wavy brown hair undulated with the wind's unruly tempo, sometimes getting stuck to her glossy pink lips. She softly mouthed the words to the songs playing on the radio and moved her head to the rhythm.

"You didn't answer my question." I turned toward her with sad eyes, the same hazel eyes that had once melted her heart, but now seemed to infuriate her. Janet turned once again to gaze at the passing cars. She blew and popped bubbles with the peppermint Orbit gum she had been chewing since the start of the ride.

"What is it that you want to hear? Could you handle the truth? Seriously. Could you? I doubt you really can." She finally turned, pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and looked straight at me with an icy stare. "I mean, why do you keep doing this to yourself? You know what happened and you know what it means. Just swallow it and walk away. Please... it's getting pretty pathetic." She turned her attention back out the window, gently placing her sunglasses back onto her nose using her thumb and index finger.

"But why? Why him? I thought things were finally getting back to the way they used to be. Remember those days? Don't you miss them like I do?" I reached for her hand, but this

gesture was rejected with the swiftness of a bird avoiding capture. “Can’t you just try to make this work? What did I do wrong? Please. Baby. I – I love you. Don’t throw away something that’s so special. I’ll do anything.” I knew I was begging, but I didn’t care. This was Janet, my first and only love. I had to fight.

“I have told you so many times, but you just *never listen*! How many times do I have to repeat myself for you to finally hear me? God! You’re so annoying. I’m so sick of this.” Her face was flushed with anger, small blood vessels exploding into delicate flowers just beneath the skin.

“Why do you hate me so much? Don’t you love me at all?”

“Stop asking so many times! I told you. It’s over. Done. Finished. For real. Permanently. Forever.”

“You don’t even want to try? I want to give this a chance. We *deserve* a chance. Why do you have to kill any hope that’s left? Let’s just turn around and go back. Huh? Please. Doesn’t that sound like a good idea?”

“Didn’t you get the point when you found out?”

“I can forgive that. I can forget it ever happened. Please, let’s just go back home, sweetie.”

“Home? I *am* going back home.”

“You know what I mean... back to *our* place. *Our* home. Where you belong. Where *we* belong. Together.”

“I don’t belong anywhere with you anymore. It’s just not going to work out. Take this exit. You know the way.”

“Does it really have to be this way?” My nose was starting to run from the tears I tried to repress. I quickly wiped it away with the sleeve of my unlaundered J.Crew t-shirt. She just wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Yes! Let’s just get to where we have to without any more talk about this.”

“Are you sure?”

“What did I say David? I don’t know how I will ever get you to understand. Actually, I don’t care anymore. I give up. I have told you the facts over and over again, but you still refuse to accept anything I say. Whatever. Do whatever you want.” She sighed and combed her fingers through her hair.

I pulled up to a circular driveway in front of her large brick house with the navy shutters. I cut the engine and turned to Janet to look at her one last time, but she had already opened the door and stepped out of the car. She balanced her bag on her thin, tanned arm and went to the trunk. I followed her deliberate movements through the rearview mirror. She calmly pulled her suitcase and duffle bag out and balanced the two before slamming the door, the thin aluminum rattling in protest. She was walking toward the door when, as though it were an afterthought, she turned around, left her things on the walkway and came over to the car. She leaned into the window, looking directly into my eyes.

“Bye David. Thanks for the ride. All my stuff is packed into boxes already. Whatever isn’t packed, you can keep, like the futon and the DVD player. I’ll get rid of everything

sometime later this week, k? Don't worry. It'll be gone before Wednesday," she said quietly, her voice had suddenly lost its previous ferocity.

I couldn't take it anymore. I ran out of the car and yelled, "But you cheated on me! With Steve! How could you! It could have been anyone but him!" She opened the front door and, without looking behind her, closed it.

I stood there staring at the space she had stood just seconds before, a pressure building in my chest. She was gone. I was still breathing hard when the phone rang, its bell piercing the quiet suburban air.

"Hello? Oh, hi Josh. Yeah, I'm coming in to volunteer today. You need me right now? Is there an emergency? They're understaffed today? OK. Be right there."

Monday, April 7, 2006

Michelle Wayne, High School Science Teacher, Age 27

The rubber tires came to a halt over the asphalt, its weight grinding loose gravel together into its discordant melody. She locked her black Volvo and headed toward the square, brick building placed in the vast acre of freshly-mowed grass. Its pungent scent overwhelmed her senses leaving a tangy residue on her tongue. Standing four stories high, the school maintained its scholarly stance with the tall windows peering sternly over its occupants.

“Good morning Michelle!” Michelle turned around, slightly startled, to see Alice behind her. Her round face was glistening with a fine mist of sweat as she laboriously made her way toward the entrance, balancing her worn leather satchel, armfuls of papers and a bag full of Erlenmeyer flasks.

“Good morning Alice.”

“You seem particularly happy today. How was your weekend? Something good happen?” Alice looked at her coworker, searching for a visible explanation for her unusually glowing complexion. She shifted, adjusting her loads so that she could cradle the papers which had already created tender imprints on her pale arms.

“Oh, do I really look different today? That’s weird because I didn’t really do much this weekend. It was just relaxing, that’s all. Got some grading finished. How was your weekend?” Michelle tried to suppress the smile that threatened to overwhelm her petite face. She

subconsciously tugged on her cable knit sweater, pulling it over the black leather belt that cinched the waist of her tweed trousers.

“Spent the entire time grading the lab reports and planning the redox reaction experiments. Took forever!”

“Tell me about it. I just found out that I might not be able to get the fetal pigs from the same company as last year. I’m rushing to find a new supplier, but everyone seems to be ordering them at this time of the year.”

“That’s terrible! I’ll let you know if I hear anything about pig dissections. Well, I have to go set up the experiment now. I’ll see you at lunch!”

“Sure, thanks. See you later.”

Michelle headed down the brown-tiled hallway until she was before the bright blue door with its distinctive, worn patches from daily contact. She walked in without turning the lights on. Putting down her traveler’s mug of coffee, she organized her paperwork at exact right angles over her desk. The sun filtered through the windows that stretched to the ceilings, softly illuminating the floating dust particles. She reveled in these few moments of silence before she was submerged in chaos once the bell rang signaling the start of the day. After several minutes of quiet preparation, she turned to the back of the room where a wooden door connected her classroom to her neighbor’s. Michelle knocked three times before entering. The room was filled with a silence that hung thickly in the air, an undisturbed silence that had been allowed to grow stale over the weekend.

“Annie?” That’s odd. She’s always on time and hardly takes any days off. “Annie?” Maybe she went to go get some coffee in the lounge. But that wouldn’t make any sense. She’s always hated the coffee there and always brought hers from home like I do. I hope she’s not sick.

Michelle slowly closed the door behind her and was left with an unsettled weight burdening her conscience. *8:15am. She’s going to be late if she doesn’t get here soon.* After pacing for five minutes, Michelle grabbed her purse and walked briskly to the main office.

“Hello Michelle!” The senior secretary looked up as Michelle walked into the office, her pen poised mid-sentence over her legal pad.

“Hi Lucy. How are you?”

“Great! We had such great weather over the weekend. Such a nice break from all that rain we’ve – Are you alright? Is there something wrong?”

“Oh no. I don’t think so. I was just wondering if Annie from Chemistry came in today? I just noticed that her classroom is still empty. You know she’s never late for class. Did she call in sick?”

“No. She didn’t. If she’s not going to be in today, then we need to find her a sub immediately. How irresponsible if she doesn’t come in at all!” Lucy’s eyebrows furrowed as she instinctively reached for a folder and picked up the phone with her free hand. “I mean, I hope nothing is wrong, but she needs to know that we need at least three hours of notice before school begins. I’m not sure if we can find a substitute at this point.”

“Wait. Lucy, let me call her first. I have her cell phone number and her house line. I’m just going to make a quick call right now.”

“Ok. I’ll call around to see if anyone’s available today, just in case.”

Michelle pulled her silver Motorola phone out of her black leather shoulder bag and pressed “5” for several seconds before “Annie Cell” came up on her screen. *Pick up Annie. Don’t get in trouble now. Please, pick up.* The phone rang for several rings before her voicemail picked up.

“Hey, it’s Annie’s cell. If I don’t know you, then don’t expect me to call you back. Otherwise, you know what to do! Have a great day!” Michelle always smiled whenever she heard her perky friend’s message. It totally captured her buoyant and carefree approach to life. She was always different from the other science teachers with their type-A personalities. She had some unmentionably terrible things that had happened in the past couple of months, but she had made so much progress in dealing with them.

“Hey Annie. It’s Michelle. Just wondering where you were since you’re still not here. Please call me back so I know you’re ok.”

Michelle pressed the red button, ending the connection, and then pressed “6.” While the phone was ringing, she said to Lucy, who was now visibly exasperated, “Just trying the house line. She must not have heard her cell phone.” *Annie, you better have a good reason for not picking up your phone.* When the answering machine came on with Annie’s voice tinny filling the line, Michelle snapped the phone shut.

“Lucy, there *has* to be something wrong. Annie would never ignore phone calls if she was going to be late. She’s always been so responsible.”

“I don’t know what Principal Matters is going to say about this. I’m going to have to make so many phone calls trying to find a replacement for today.”

“I’m so sorry. Listen, I’m just going to go over to her apartment just to make sure she’s ok. Something just doesn’t feel right. She only lives ten minutes away from here. I’ll be back in time before class starts, I promise. I don’t have a class during first period anyway. Lucy, I promise. Just give me ten minutes. I’ll call you as soon as I find anything. I’ll be right back.”

“Alright. Call me as soon as you get there. Keep your phone on and with you at all times, ok? Just in case I need to reach you.”

“Of course. Thanks so much Lucy! And try calling Stacy Gordon. She’s a fantastic Chemistry sub and she’s usually available during the mornings. I remember when she had to come in for David Gray when he was on vacation. She picked things up really quickly and the students just loved her.”

Michelle ran toward the parking lot and when she got closer to the car, she yanked her car keys out of the side pocket of her bag. She chewed her immaculate fingernails and tapped her toes through every single traffic light and stop sign until she pulled up to the familiar apartment complex in a quiet, suburban neighborhood. A row of artfully trimmed hedges lined the concrete walkway to each section. Parking and slamming the car door, she ran up a flight of stairs and knocked on the door of 27B.

“Annie? Annie! Are you there? Annie! It’s Michelle. Is everything ok?” She reached down and twisted the doorknob. It gave and with a soft click, the door swung open. The curtains were drawn and every light was off. She expertly maneuvered her way around the

apartment until she was before the bedroom door. With shallow breaths, she knocked softly on the door. “Annie?” She whispered. “Annie, are you in there? Can I come in?” Turning the knob, she slowly entered the room, her footsteps making soft temporary imprints in the ivory carpet. “Annie. Are you still sleeping? Are you sick?” The bed was still made.

A strip of warm light fanned out from the bottom slit of the bathroom door, spreading its rays in a soft semicircle. Her heart was in her ears, beating twice as fast as her leaden pace as she made her way toward the door. She stood before its entrance, unable to touch the wooden frame. She held her breath and counted back from ten. When she finally opened the door, she looked up and dropped her purse to the ground. With the soft thud of the leather, the sound of the keys echoed throughout the chamber.

Monday, April 7, 2006

Janet Lennox, College student, Age 21

It was a day just like any other. I woke up with my pillows at my feet, the comforter strewn haphazardly across the hardwood floor and my teddy bear on top of the cotton-and-goosedown heap. It had been the seventh time I had pressed the snooze button before I could even manage to open a sleep-encrusted eye. I peered over my shoulder to see if he was there. He hadn't come back last night. Thank God. I don't want to deal with him before class. He's not going to take the news well. Thinking about that painfully bright red hair of his made me shudder.

I turned the radio onto my favorite hip hop station and groggily dragged my feet into the bathroom, dodging the cardboard boxes that were littered across the floor. I grabbed my towel and stepped into the shower, allowing the hot water to drip down my body for several moments before fully awaking. Thirty minutes later, I was dressed and eating a toast as I ran out of my room to class. As usual, I was five minutes late and running across the campus, taking the stairs two at a time.

After sleeping through the 75-minute history lecture, I felt a bit more refreshed from my lack of sleep. I couldn't stop watching *Lost* after finishing the second season. That cliffhanger was ridiculous! I had to put the third season DVD in to see what happened for the next couple of episodes.

I was just about to pay for my usual grilled chicken salad at the dining hall when my phone rang. “Hello?” I balanced the phone on my shoulder as I counted out the money. I grabbed the salad, a fork and a knife and sat at an empty table. “David?”

“Yeah, hello? Janet? Can you hear me?” Ugh. Here we go again with his passive, baby talk. He never has a clue.

“Yeah. What do you want?” I cut the chicken strips into bite-sized pieces and tossed the salad together with half of the dressing drizzled over it.

“Um, we need to talk... About what you said yesterday.”

“I thought you understood what I told you. I have nothing more to say, nothing more to add. We’re done talking.” Mmm the salad’s unusually good today. I was starving during class. Needs just a tad bit more dressing, though. Dammit. I forgot my Diet Coke. I pulled some quarters out of my wallet and went to the vending machine nearby.

“No, I really want to see you right now. Are you eating at Marty’s?” Shit. How does he always seem to know where I am? What a creepy stalker. I fished the soda out from the slot and sat back down at the table.

“No. I’m actually... er... heading toward Shlosser’s office. I have an appointment in a couple of minutes.”

“Oh... well, can we talk when you’re done? Can you call me so we can meet up somewhere? I just got back to the apartment.”

“Uh. Sure. I guess.”

“Wait a minute. Why are there boxes all over the place? What the...” As his voice trailed off, I could hear him slowly walking around the creaking hardwood floors. There was the sound of boxes being pushed around.

“David, can you, like, not touch my stuff?”

“Janet. When were you going to tell me?”

“When I got back from my... meeting.”

“And what if I wasn’t here? You would’ve just left without telling me?”

“Well, I’m not moving *everything* out today. Only some of it. And I would have told you Dave. Who do you think I am?”

“We couldn’t talk about this before you made such a rash decision?”

“It’s not rash. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now.”

“For a while? Oh my... and where do you plan on staying?”

“At my parents’. Just for a while. I’ll commute. No big deal.”

“I can’t believe you. You... you... I don’t even know what to say. I’m speechless.

What am I *supposed* to say in this situation?” His voice was getting squeaky, like it always does right before he cries. Ew. He *would* cry.

“Can you just call me a heartless bitch and get over it? Or just break or ruin something of mine if it’ll make you feel better. Just not my laptop. Or my Playstation. Or my stereo. Or my camera. Or my DVDs. But everything else is fair game. I promise. It’s ok. I don’t mind. It’s what exes do anyway. It’s a very normal part of breaking up. Everyone goes through it.”

“You’re already calling me your *ex*?” He coughed, trying to clear his throat. He’s probably trying so hard to swallow his tears.

“I didn’t expect you to still consider me your girlfriend after what happened yesterday. Seriously. Who would?”

“Listen. Can you just come home right now? I mean, I would consider this is a pretty big emergency. You owe me at least the decency to be saying all this to me in person. Please come home right now.”

“I’ll be there in an hour. I still have some things to do on campus.” I hung up and then shut the phone off. I finished the salad and headed over to the bookstore to stall for the next hour.

Monday, April 7, 2006

Scott Powell, Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, Age 43

“Good morning and welcome to the Annual Spring Meeting of the College of Arts and Sciences. These meetings provide a great chance to share some thoughts about the College, where we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. It is crucial to meet in order to reconnect with one another and to share our ideas for what this school should and is able to accomplish.”

His tailored gray pinstripe suit hung gracefully on his tall and athletic build. Each staff member sat in awe as his charm pervaded throughout the room like an intoxicating perfume. He presented the school’s budget, its statistics, his hopes for the next year with a charismatic smile, convincing everyone that his plan would be the best option. After the Q&A session, he concluded the meeting by acknowledging his “invaluable staff” and the “loving support of the greatest College in the nation.”

He stepped off the podium, officially signaling the end of the meeting, and headed toward the refreshments set up at the back of the room. Casually drinking from a cup of black coffee, he made his way around the room, personally greeting and making small conversations with everyone.

“Dean Powell? Do you have a minute? I would really like to talk with you about your plans for the new student building. I’m writing an article about it in the paper,” said a petite

student with dark-rimmed glasses. She was dressed in a well-fitting black blazer, a crisp white button down shirt and jeans, all pulled together with a strand of small pearls and black satin ballet flats. Her neat ponytail only emphasized her round, dark brown eyes and graceful bone structure. “Then you wouldn’t mind if I recorded our conversation? I have found it to be more effective when interviewing rather than trying to write everything down at that moment. Plus, it ensures accurate quotes.”

“Of course, my dear. And, how do you think the students will respond to the structure? Do you think it’ll meet all of their needs? We did conduct a student-wide survey to see what would benefit the community best.”

“Yes. I found it very impressive. It reminded me a bit of the way Frank Lloyd Wright was known for his organic architecture. The building will really exemplify the school’s natural setting and the needs of the students.”

“I’m very impressed! You have certainly done your research Miss...?”

“Elizabeth. Elizabeth Tillman.” She was unfazed by his compliments. She adjusted her glasses and kept her voice recorder poised in between them.

“Dean Powell, when is the projected – ”

“Please, Elizabeth, call me Scott.” She flushed a bright pink and looked away from his eyes briefly. She cleared her throat uncomfortably before regaining her professional composure and eye contact.

“Dean Powell, when is this building supposed to be completed? Will the construction be distracting to classes being attended at that time?”

“Well, Elizabeth,” he said warmly, visibly enjoying her awkward response to his suggestion, grazed his fingers at her elbow. “We thought it best if the construction occurred during the summer when – ”

“Dean Powell? President Wilson would like a word with you before he heads over to his next Planning Meeting. It’s urgent,” said his secretary, tapping him on the shoulder. He finally let go of her arm.

“My apologies Elizabeth. Please feel welcome to come by my office at any time to go over anything you might need for the paper.”

Monday, April 7, 2006

Richard Wayne, Lawyer, Age 30

Notes for 04/07/2006

Jane Doe v. Oberweis Dairy

Case between a teenager, identified as Jane Doe (16 years old), and her 25-year-old shift supervisor, Matthew Nayman. Both worked at an Oberweis Dairy store in Illinois. Jane filed a discrimination claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission - subjected to inappropriate sexual advances. Although a trial judge rejected claim because found that girl "welcomed" Nayman's advances, 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said Jane Doe's views of Nayman's behavior irrelevant because she is a minor. Court ruling in favor in Jane Doe's favor would give teenagers greater workplace protection from harassment.

Burlington Industries, Inc. v. Ellerth

Case between Kimberly Ellerth, a salesperson in one of Burlington Industries' divisions, and one of her supervisors who was a mid-level manager who had authority to hire and promote employees. Ellerth quit after 15 months of employment because had been subjected to constant sexual harassment by supervisor - repeated boorish and offensive remarks and gestures. Ellerth refused advances but did not suffer any tangible retaliation - was actually promoted once. Also did not inform any authority about inappropriate conduct even with knowledge of Burlington's policy against sexual harassment. Supreme Court in favor of Kimberly Ellerth.

Joseph Oncale v. Sundowner Offshore Services

Case between Joseph Oncale, a former employee on a Chevron U.S.A., Inc., oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, and Sundowner Offshore Services. Oncale had been forcibly subjected to sex-related, humiliating actions against him by the crew. Complaints to a supervisory personnel proved to no avail - was picked on by supervisor. Oncale filed complaint alleging that was discriminated against in his employment because of his sex. Court in favor for Oncale.

“Honey?”

“Hey darling. I was just about to call you. I’ve been doing some work on that special case you told me about, the one about your coworker. We definitely have a great chance at winning. However, it’s really crucial that your friend commits to testifying and charging whoever – ”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Michelle? Is there something wrong?”

“I’m so sorry Rich. I have to cancel our plans for tonight. I can’t make it to dinner at all. It’s just too hectic here. I have to be here.”

“Michelle! What’s wrong? Where are you? Why does your voice sound so strange? What is all that noise in the background?”

“I have to go. I’m really sorry. It’s Annie. I have to be with her so I won’t be able to come home until really late. Please pick up some dinner for yourself on your way home from work, ok? Don’t wait up for me.”

“Michelle! Annie? What’s wrong with – ”

Monday, April 7, 2006

Michelle Wayne, High School Science Teacher, Age 27

After taking a deep breath, I finally opened my eyes. The bathroom was filled with yellow sunlight as the clouds cleared, giving the sun a chance to reach the bathroom through the white lace curtains. My hands were shaking but the results were clear. The small plastic window showed the blue line that had appeared, the highly anticipated bright blue line distinct in bold contrast to its pure white background. It could only mean one thing. *I'm pregnant. It's a miracle.*

I picked up the phone and dialed with shaky hands. Within moments, countless fertility treatments, IVF, hormone treatments all dissolved into the air like a forgotten pain. *We've been waiting for this day for almost two years now.*

"Hello? Hi Jane! This is Mrs. Wayne. How are you? ... I'm great. How are those law school applications? Do you hear back soon? ... That's great to hear! You won't have any problems, trust me. Let me know when you hear any news, OK? Anyway, is my husband there? Could I talk to him please? Thanks so much." I was pacing the bedroom, walking on the plush ivory carpet from wall to wall, waiting for his voice.

"Thank you Jane. Hello? Michelle? Is something wrong? You never call me this early in the day."

“Honey! Nothing’s wrong. I was just wondering if you were busy tonight. We haven’t had a date in a while since we’ve both been so busy at work. Plus, I was really craving those pork chops at Stephanie’s.”

“Tonight? Uh, I’m a little busy ... but I can push some things back and do them tomorrow. No big deal. We really haven’t had a date in too long. I should be home by seven.”

“Perfect. I’ll make reservations for 7:30 tonight. And sweetie? Expect some really great news too. I want to tell you in person because this isn’t the type of thing to say over the phone. It has to be told in person.”

“I can’t wait. I’ll see you tonight. Have a good day at work.”

“You too! Please don’t be late ok? Love you.”

“Love you more.”

I put the phone down by its charger on the dresser and finished touching up my makeup. I grabbed my traveler’s mug of coffee – he always made my coffee while he’s making his every morning – and left for the school.

Sunday, April 6, 2006

Annie Lennox, High School English Teacher, Age 25

The End.

Heavy winter night pressed upon her
surrounding on all sides, closing in
rapidly. Panic surged her legs to a brisk walk,
Run.

Sets of gleaming eyes peered from the ghostly
sheets – which she tried desperately to
ignore. Singing mandolin in her head – resonating
frets and notes dancing a wild jig.

Freezing mist settling uncomfortably in her
lungs, dark, frosty store window displays
whirling by. Panic surged her legs to a brisk walk,
Run.

Red, brick walls in an L-shape, cradling her
broken body. Burning pain, boiling blood, searing
helplessness. The mandolin screeches in minor octaves –
the strumming harsh. Malicious laughter, jeers,
fun in red and white.

Soaking slush seeping into her worn jeans, knees
weary from a caterpillar's walk into the gray
streets. Panic no longer surged her legs to a brisk walk,
Crawl.

A real song from the mandolin – playing a haunting,
empty tune.

Stop.

Rest.

Sunday, April 7, 2006

Steve Ray, First-year Medical Student, Age 23

The smell of disinfectant reflected off of the shiny white linoleum floors, off of the white wallpaper, off of the blue-tinted fluorescent lights in an endless cycle. This vacuum evened out the playing ground for every patient to enter its sterile grasp. Here in the hospital, self-determination ceased to exist as soon as the generic gown was put on. A person was now simply a manifestation of his or her symptoms.

With the constant cooling effect of Purell on his hands, Steve continued to make his volunteer rounds. His dark navy smock provided a stark complement to the turquoise pools that were rimmed by dark brown lashes. Manipulating his naturally easygoing smile and charm, even the most irritable patient eventually succumbed to his pleasantries.

“Hey there buddy. My name’s Steve,” he said as he entered the room of Mike Winters, a seven-year-old whose parents had just discovered that he was diabetic.

“Hi,” Mike replied indifferently, his eyes still glued to the cartoons playing in front of him.

“Are you bored? Want to play a game?” Steve pulled up a chair close to Mike’s bed and sat back into its mesh frame.

“Nope.”

“What if I told you I can get you a Playstation to play in here?” Mike’s eyes moved to look at Steve while attempting to maintain his cool composure. “They don’t let just anyone borrow it you know.”

“Depends. What games do you have? Because I’m not going to play a stupid girl game. They’re so dumb.”

“You like baseball?”

“Duh.”

“If I said that I had All-Star Baseball 2004?”

“Only if you have the one from 2005. Then, we have a deal.”

“If I do, then are you going to let me play with you?” Mike thought for a minute, furrowing his eyebrows, carefully calculating his decision.

“Could I get a pudding too?”

“Sorry, buddy. You know I can’t do that without permission.”

“I hate these new rules.”

“I know, I know. But look at it this way, you can still eat the things you liked before you came here. You get to get *special* candy and desserts. Ones that were made especially for you so that your body would be happiest. That’s not too bad, right?”

“I guess.” Mike’s expression softened.

“So about that All-Star Baseball... if I have the 2005 edition, you’ll let me play with you? I bet I can beat you anyway. Is that why you’re so scared of letting me play? Because you don’t want to lose?” Steve winked playfully at Mike.

“No way! I *always* have the best team and the best players. No one can beat me. Not even my Dad!”

“We’ll see about that.”

* * * * *

“Hey sweetie. Sorry I’m late.” She swept her hair to the side as she bent over to kiss him lightly on the cheek. As she settled into the chair, the metal ivy pattern pressed lightly into her thighs, creating a pink imprint.

“It’s ok. I just got here myself. I ordered for the both of us. Steak sandwiches with iced tea’s ok right?”

“Of course. Oh my gosh.” She leaned closer to the table, minimizing their distance with her face, creases grooved into the corners of her eyes in frustration. David wouldn’t let me leave. He has such separation anxiety issues. Today, he made me watch *Braveheart* with him. Again.”

“What a loser. Same loser he always was in college. Is he still struggling with his Bio research? I was published in two papers by the time I graduated last year. Guess he won’t be making the same record, huh?”

“Well, he’s not doing as bad as last year. At least he stopped breaking beakers. Whatever. As long as he’s studying hard for classes, I can care less how he’s doing in any other part of his life.”

“It’s time you let him go Janet. Isn’t the biochem class almost over anyway?”

“True. I got all of his notes and slides already. I can’t believe I lasted this long!” A waiter balancing two plates of sandwiches and two drinks on a tray carefully placed the order before them.

“I know. We should celebrate your freedom. You’re quite the actress. I can’t believe you even lasted living with the kid.”

Steve and Janet tore into their lunch, a stream of oily red blood carving its path down to their hungry chins.

Sunday, April 6, 2006

Janet Lennox, College student, Age 21

JL: Hello?

AL: Hi... Jane?

JL: Yeah? Who's this?

AL: It's Annie.

JL: What do you want? You haven't called in months.

AL: Yeah... it's been awhile huh? How have you been? How's school? Are you still with that boyfriend? I forgot his name...

JL: Did you really call me to ask me how I was? Because I don't buy it. And that boyfriend you remember has been long gone for almost a year now. But you wouldn't know that, would you? Do you need money or something?

AL: No no. Nothing like that. Just... haven't talked to my sister in so long. I was just curious to know how you were doing.

JL: Ugh. Seriously Annie, I'm not stupid. Just tell me what you really want. Are you in trouble or something?

AL: No... no trouble. I like hearing your voice. Makes me remember our childhood. Do you ever think of the days in Milltown? When we lived in that gray house with the navy shutters and the playground in the backyard?

JL: Uh, not really. That was ages ago and I was too young to really remember too much anyway.

Annie, if you really don't have anything to say, I have to go. I have to go to a lunch date in a couple of minutes. I'm kinda busy today.

AL: Oh. Right. Sorry. Should have known how busy you'd be. Just... I want to ask you one more thing.

JL: What is it?

AL: You've had a lot of experience with men before, right?

JL: Ew, Annie! You're the older one. You should know all these things already. Why are you asking me?

AL: No. Not that. I mean, what would you say was crossing the line?

JL: What do you mean?

AL: What would you define as someone who violated personal boundaries?

JL: Are you talking about *rape*?

AL: Um, have you ever heard things about professors or deans involved in scandals at your school?

JL: What are you talking about? This is all too random. How are those two things connected at all?

AL: Scandals. Have there ever been any scandals at your school? Was it ever reported in the paper? Or have you ever heard any rumors?

JL: No, not really. I mean, everyone has heard of some student banging a professor to get better grades. It happens all the time.

AL: It does? And these professors never get caught? These students always consent to doing those *things* with the professor?

JL: You're nuts! No. They don't really get caught, but of course it happens. These things always happen on college campuses.

AL: So you don't think these college students were forcibly –

JL: No. Annie. They totally ask for it. The dumb girls just sit front and center in class with short skirts to get attention. They need the grade boost or else they would fail the class.

Seriously, why the sudden interest?

AL: Oh. No reason at all. Just heard something at my high school about someone at your school. No big deal.

JL: Ok. Well, I have to go now.

AL: Ah, alright. I guess I'll let you go. Let's get together for lunch sometime? Just to catch up a bit?

JL: Not sure if I'll have time.

AL: Oh, right. Sure. Well, have fun at your lunch date.

JL: Bye!

Thursday, March 27, 2006

Annie Lennox, High School English Teacher, Age 25

The rain was relentless. Thick sheets of it crashed onto the windshield as the wipers tried in vain to give me enough visibility to maneuver around the winding roads. I grabbed a napkin from its neat pile stored in the glove compartment and cleared some of the condensation that had formed on the glass. A pair of round eyes glowed several feet away, illuminated by the headlights straining to break through the dense rain. As I slammed my foot on the brake, its nose and ears became visible, its sharp features etched into the viscous darkness before it fled. I put the car into park and sat still, breathing heavily as I waited for my pulse to stop ringing in my ears.

“Tonight, we welcome several accomplished faculty in order to publicly recognize their achievements. We are so lucky to have such gifted writers, scientists, mathematicians, and professors in this town. These talents are what distinguish our education system above others. The future lies within our students and they are receiving the best exposure to the kind of education that will set them apart from others in their future endeavors. Our first guest tonight is Miss Annie Lennox, who, at such a young age, has already published her first novel Watermelon Seeds and Red Pickup Trucks, which was received with much critical acclaim. She is currently an English teacher at the high school, although I have tried, to no avail, to persuade her to join our staff at the university. Please welcome Miss Lennox as she reads an excerpt from her work.” Polite applause and laughter resounded throughout the auditorium as I carefully made my way to

the podium. I could feel their gaze following my path, taking in my navy ruffled blouse and gray pants.

“Thank you Dean Powell for such a warm welcome. I apologize for my unusually wet appearance. The weather tonight is awful, isn’t it? Anyway, thank you all for coming tonight even though it must have been quite difficult to get here. This novel is unlike anything I’ve ever written before. I decided to write a more light-hearted piece that portrays a humorous mother-daughter relationship. Many have asked if this is based on the relationship I have with my mother. Although we are very close, I am disappointed to say that we don’t sound quite as witty on a regular basis. I will be reading from my favorite chapter. It begins with the protagonist’s discovery of her daughter’s boyfriend’s wallet, which happens to contain a parent’s worst nightmare. A condom. What is a mother to do in such a situation? Here’s how the mother confronts her child as she drives her to school – ”

An hour later, I was still clutching my cup of Sprite and greeting people when Michelle gently pushed her way into a conversation I was having with Jane, my editor.

“It’s so hard to get a minute with you by ourselves!” She was flushed from the heat of the recycled, exhaled air hanging in a humid cloud throughout the room. “That was such a great reading, Annie.”

“Thanks Michelle. I really appreciate that you came out, even though you’ve read my book before. Where’s Rich?”

“Oh, he has to work late again today. Big case coming up. Do you want to go get some dessert after this?”

“Oh no. I can’t. Dean Powell said that he needed me to help him with a speech that he has to give next week.”

“Then, I’ll see you tomorrow, ok?”

“Sure. Have a safe drive home!”

As the crowd thinned, I found Dean Powell in the middle of a conversation, laughter always emanating from his listeners.

“Excuse me, Dean Powell? I was wondering if you had a minute? It’s getting late and I need to head home soon.”

“Oh, Annie, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to make you wait so long. Please excuse me Jean, Carl, Stephanie, and Sam. I have to get some help from our award-winning writer here. Maybe I can finally persuade her to join our staff!”

As he walked away from his group, he gently placed his hand at the small of my back and led me out of the auditorium. I picked up my pace until I was out of reach.

“Where is your speech Dean?”

“Please, call me Scott. No need for formalities. I see us as such great acquaintances since you’ve helped me so much in the past.” He opened the door to his office, a warmly lit room with plush leather armchairs and cherry wood bookshelves lining the walls. “Come on in Annie. Would you like something to drink?”

“No. I’m fine, thank you. Is the speech on your desk?”

“There’s no hurry. Here, take this. It’s always so nice to have a good wine while reading, no? Didn’t you tell me that you did that at home when grading papers or when you’re writing?”

“Well, yes. I guess I’ll have just a sip.”

“And here is the speech I wrote. I’m just afraid I might come off as too flippant and ignorant. I need everyone to know how sincere I am with this project.”

“Sure. I’m sure it sounds fine.” I took a sip of the deep red liquid and started reading. Soon, my eyelids started to slowly close. A dull humming sound swelled in the room as the edges of the furniture blurred together. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought. Do you think I could take this home and call your secretary when I’m done?” I shook my head trying to clear the fog that had come to a rest in my senses.

“Did anyone tell you how pretty you are Annie?”

“Excuse me?”

After that, I don’t remember what happened. I woke up the next morning in my apartment with my clothes and my makeup still on, a migraine pounding at my temples. When I went to take a shower, I noticed blood on my underwear. I had my period already two weeks ago.

CHAPTER 3

“Shark Attack”

"Family quarrels are bitter things. They don't go by any rules.

They're not like aches or wounds; they're more like splits in the skin that won't heal

because there's not enough material."

-- F. Scott Fitzgerald

I.

There was blood in my toothpaste, a streak of red laced throughout the pile of white foam gathered at the bottom of the sink. I turned the faucet until the bloody foam disappeared. When I flossed, the metallic taste permeated throughout my mouth and coated my tongue. I rinsed my mouth out with Listerine until I couldn't taste the iron from the blood anymore.

Shit. I sucked in the cold morning air through my teeth and winced; the raw sensitivity shot a short wave of pain signals to my brain. *Damn those bad genes.* I could hear the condescending voice of my dentist shouting over the jarring drill and the uninviting metal stabbing at my sore gums. *Scrape, scrape.* "You should really floss everyday." *Scrape. Scrape, scrape.* "You're going to end up with dentures just like your grandparents." *Scrape. Poke. Suction. It's not my fault my mom married my dad, you jerk. I definitely got the short end of the genetic stick.*

I dried my pale face, littered with patches of inflamed acne, and began to dress for work, another monotonous day at the keyboard, analyzing rich – and lazy – people's money. Indented pockets of rough scars, remnants of lost battles with Clearasil and impatient fingernails, appeared as darkened, distracting valleys on my otherwise-attractive face. I tugged on a pair of dark trousers, a sharp inhale necessary to zip them up the last third of the way; the waistline pinched me at the sides as the excess skin rolled over and sat uncomfortably on top of the zipper. Above my dresser, plain, cherry wood, and purchased at Ikea, rested a dusty frame of a tanned and smiling family. Two tall slender women with sun-kissed highlights stood next to a short and

stocky man. Slightly off to the side, stood an gawky teenager with oversized glasses, a permanent grimace, and bangs hiding almost half of her face, a poor attempt to conceal the acne raging over every inch of her adolescent skin. Although it had been the hottest day of the summer that year in the Hamptons, I had worn a long-sleeved Dartmouth shirt loosely draping over my cuffed Gap jeans.

With a sigh, I threw my hair up into a ponytail, jammed my feet into white sneakers, grabbed the microwaved cup of coffee, and ran out the door with my briefcase. As I was making my way down 60th and 4th, my cell phone vibrated in my jacket pocket.

“Mom? How are you? Huh? Calm down. What’s wrong? I can barely make out what you’re saying. Unh-huh... *oh*. It’s that bad? The heart attack was inevitable. Where was he? He’s still sleeping from the surgery? Ok. I’ll go when I get off work... if I can, uh, I guess. Yeah. Ok. Bye, Mom. Stop crying.” *Step. Beat. Exhale. Step. Beat. Exhale. Step. Beat. Exhale. Step. Beat. Exhale.*

Good. The bastard got what he deserved. How many times was he warned of his high blood pressure? I continued to walk, my pace a beat slower than it had been, in a daze for the next five blocks.

It wasn’t until my eighth birthday that I realized how much my father hated me. I had his short legs, his acne, his weak tooth enamel, his slow metabolism, his tendency to go through life largely unnoticed. I was his mirror image, yet he hated me, couldn’t stand my presence. In a drunken rage, he had stormed into the living room where I was in the midst of blowing out the lit candles on the Carvel ice cream cake. My mother, my sister, and my six closest friends were smiling, their faces glowing by the flames of the wax candles, a picturesque moment. Before my

puffed cheeks could exhale, he came in, kicking my presents aside so that they went sliding across the room, growling in a low voice, “You don’t deserve any of this. You shouldn’t get to celebrate your birthday when your brother lost his life to save you, you worthless piece of shit.” He threw his bottle of Budweiser at the wall, spraying cold beer and broken glass in an arc over the party. The flames extinguished into the puddles of colorful wax frozen in an abstract watercolor of primary colors.

I felt my heart pound in my ears, the heart I had once shared with her brother. *Step. Beat. Exhale. Step. Beat. Exhale. Step. Beat. Exhale. Beat. Exhale. Beat. Exhale. Beat. Exhale. Beat. Exhale. Beat. Beat. Beat. Beat. beat....*

II.

My parents were fighting again.

“You lying, cheating son of a bitch! I should have known that a common whore of a secretary would attract a trashy guy like you. My mother was right when she said that someone from such a low-class family would only cause hell.”

When this happened, I knew just what to do. I knocked three times on the wall that I shared with Chris (“Knock once if you want to say good night, twice if you had a bad dream or you’re scared, and three times when it’s an emergency.”). Just as he said he would, there was a knock at my door within five seconds. He had always kept his promises.

“Come in,” I said as quietly as I could. I was already sitting at the corner of my bed with my Little Mermaid blanket thrown over my head, squeezing my teddy bear.

“Shut the hell up bitch! I’m the best god-damn thing that ever happened to your sorry life. Who brings home the money now? You are the most paranoid idiot I’ve ever met.”

Chris closed the door behind him softly. As he walked toward me, he picked up the Playskool tape player and the headphones from my white bookshelf. The tape player was always at the bottom shelf where my favorite coloring books were. We both had to be very quiet because Mom and Dad were in one of their “moods.”

“Hey there buddy,” he said as he climbed into the cave I had made with my blanket. Something shattered. I cringed and squeezed my teddy bear tighter until my knuckles turned white. He gave me a big hug, wrapping me in his worn grey sweatshirt. He smelled like his

favorite Entenmann's glazed donuts that he always had hidden in a special drawer in his room. Only I knew where it was because he had shown me his secret spot. No one else in the family knew.

"Get the hell out of this house NOW! I don't ever want to see you ever again! Stay at that bitch's house since you guys can't keep your hands off each –"

"So, are you ready for our adventure?" he asked in an excited whisper. I nodded. He opened the red plastic player and flipped the cassette over to the other side.

"I'm so sick of this shit from you. Just wait, one day I won't take –"

"Do you remember what happened last time?" Chris asked.

"Yeah. The princess was just about to meet the prince. He just beat the bad dragon that was scaring everyone away from the castle. The prince needs to kiss her right?"

"Divorce would be heaven compared to –"

"That's right. Good job remembering! Every girl needs a prince, right? The ones who can beat the dragons are the ones you want." He winked at me as he put one of the headphones into my right ear and the other in his left. After he pressed "Play," we both covered the ears that didn't have headphones in them.

That day, the princess and the prince had their magical kiss after the prince had triumphantly defeated the dragon, and they lived happily ever after.

III.

I turned off my cell phone. I went to the nearest homeless man and offered my stale coffee contained in the gray stainless steel “Citigroup” traveler’s mug to him. I walked into the Starbucks next to the marble and glass Citigroup building. *I deserve this today.* “A venti cinnamon dolce latte with extra whipped cream, cinnamon, and nutmeg on top please.” With the six dollars worth of caffeine pumping through my veins, I walked to work to the beat of my quickened heart rate. *You don’t care. You don’t care. You don’t care. You don’t care. He deserves it.*

The rancid odor of burnt rubber suddenly exploded in the air. The impatient horns of yellow cabs and startled drivers honked, yelled and made obscene gestures at the car that had made a sudden halt for the young girl dashing across the street by herself, a streak of pink breaking the monotonous city horizon. Her mother had her child wrapped tightly around her arms, sobbing hysterically by the sidewalk. The blonde pigtails were barely visible as the mother’s navy fleece engulfed the small child. The other cars passed the huddled pair, shouting and glaring at the near-fatal accident that they had almost caused. Within minutes, the city was on its hurried way with cars pumping charcoal gray exhaust into the hazy morning without fanfare to what had just occurred.

It had been a freezing day in February when it happened. The day that changed everything. Everyone blames me. I don’t really remember. I don’t really know for sure. I guess I did it. I killed my brother.

Fatal car accident on Garden State Parkway: brother dead, sisters survive

February 2, 1983



CRANFORD, New Jersey (AP) -- A Toyota Camry carrying two sisters and a brother, the driver, reached a tragic destination last night on the Garden State Parkway. The 18-year-old driver was found dead at the accident site with two survivors, the victim's sisters, one at the passenger seat and the other in the back.

The car was discovered in a snow embankment on the side of the Parkway after a frantic 911 call was made by a passing car. When ambulances had reached the site of the accident, Christopher was found clutching his 6-year-old sister, Martha, who had been seated in the passenger seat. Priscilla Mullins, a 10-year-old sister of the victim, suffered minor injuries from the impact.

On their way to a birthday celebration, authorities speculate that the car had lost control and careened off of the highway. Upon impact with the embankment, the Camry flipped over, finally coming to a rest with the passengers trapped underneath.

"He was the brightest, sweetest kid. It is such an unfortunate tragedy. This shouldn't have happened. The neighborhood's prayers are with the Mullins," said a long-time neighbor of the family.

The parents of the victim have avoided the media and have refused to comment.

This had been the biggest blizzard that New Jersey had seen since the North American Blizzard of 1996 three years ago. Snow plows have been clearing roads throughout the day, salting icy patches.

Authorities are still unsure as to the direct cause of the accident. Although, they report that there was no indication of foul play nor of the intoxication of the driver, Christopher Mullins, more information will be reported after the autopsy.

The funeral is scheduled to be held on Thursday, February 4, 1983 at the Dooley Funeral Home.

IV.

It was the ideal spring day, the kind movies liked to portray as an idealistic reality while filming the beginning of a love story: the lovers beginning their journey by having elaborate picnics in the lush, green grass of a local picnic as children ran around boisterously with each other, chasing dogs and kites around their periphery, all while soft pop music gently played in the background.

The family was getting ready for Chris's first baseball game of the season, a buzz of excitement ringing in the air as everyone gathered everything they would need: sunglasses, snacks, sunscreen, a camera with extra film, coloring books, a camcorder. The most important accessory of all was the customized heather-grey polo that each person owned and wore to each game. Each had their own name embroidered in navy on the upper left corner of the front and "Team Mullins: We Love You Chris" in proud navy block letters on the back. At first, Chris had been embarrassed when the shirts were delivered to their house, Mom's idea after seeing the Messner's matching jerseys last season.

"Aw Mom! What are the guys going to say when they see these shirts? No one else has matching family shirts like these. And don't use the Messners as an example because they're just the exception and you know it." He blushed, his sun-induced freckles fading into the sudden flush of his cheeks. His tall frame suddenly seemed boyish as he poked at the shirts with his index finger.

“Come on Chris. These are so much fun! Didn’t I design them well? We’re your personal cheering squad,” Mom had said, proudly layering her “MOM” shirt over her cotton, rose-printed pajamas.

“Dad, would you have wanted these when you were playing in high school? Imagine your family jumping up and down in matching outfits in front of the entire school,” Chris said gently with just a hint of cajoling. “You have to take my side. A lot of my friends come out to these games. You’re the only other male presence who would understand why this is unnecessary. Trust me, I can see and hear you guys well enough without these matching uniforms.”

Dad laughed. “Son, just go along with it for a day. See how happy your mother is? I understand why you would want to look like the mysterious stud in front of all those girls you’re trying to impress, but just put up with it for one day.” Dad winked and tousled Chris’s curly brown hair playfully.

“Fine. But just this once!” He sighed and threw up his arms in a dramatic sign of resignation. “I can never win with you guys.” We all laughed and cheered with triumph. We all knew he would cave in eventually. He was just that type of person.

“We should take a picture! Everyone, put your shirts on. Hurry, before we’re late!” Mom handed out everyone’s shirts and aimed the camera several feet away from us. She set the self-timer and ran over to join the group. That picture still remains today above the fireplace in the center, a place of honor, framed with in pewter, all five of us smiling and Chris standing in the center with his green and white uniform.

Those polos eventually grew on Chris, but he still pretended to dislike them before each baseball game. It had become a ritual that everyone enjoyed more with each repetition.

Each time he looked up in the stands right before he stepped up to bat, he saw us jumping up and down on the aluminum bleachers, shamelessly shouting encouragements. “Come on Chris! You can do it!” “Keep your eye on the ball buddy! Don’t rush your swing!” “Chris, you’re the best baseball player ever!” The corner of his lip turned up in appreciation for a fraction of a second before he faced the pitcher with focused determination.

Chris’s baseball games were the only days when everyone acted like a family. It was the day of rest from the normal tumult that overflowed in the Mullins household. Mom and Dad stopped fighting long enough to act like a “normal” family held together by the guidance of loving parents. Dad came home early for work those days, one of the rare occasions he would tear himself away from his job; the only other times he would take a break from work was to teach Chris how to golf at the local golf range two Saturday afternoons a month, one of their father-son traditions that had accumulated over the years. Priscilla stopped locking herself in her room doing who-knows-what, blasting ‘NSync from her stereo. I wouldn’t schedule a play date for that afternoon and I was usually pretty booked with plans made with my neighborhood friends.

Once spring, summer, and fall were over – thank God Chris played baseball for three consecutive seasons – we all returned back to their usual routine of fighting, of cold silence, of isolation, of bitterness, as if those seasons hadn’t existed. Team Mullins took a break during the long, dark winter days.

V.

I plugged my ears with my white iPod headphones and increased the volume past my usual by a third of the way. With rap drumming its angry beat into my pulse, I swiped my plastic employee ID at the turnstile. In the elevator, several gray and black suited employees turned to stare at me as my headphones blared over the classical music playing gently in the background, the soothing notes of Chopin and Vivaldi meant to make the innately-awkward rides between floors seemingly more comfortable. Instead of averting each other's eyes and concentrating on counting the floors passing by in red digital numbers, my fellow employees actually had somewhere to look today, at me.

On any other day of the week, I would be the one pushed into the corner, shielding myself with my generic black leather briefcase. Today, I didn't care. Today, I stood with my square jaw set resolutely in front of the steel sliding doors, tapping my black leather pump to the music and mouthing the words to her music. *Come on come on I see no changes wake up in the morning and I ask myself is life worth living.*

At the fifteenth floor, I walked out of the elevator to everyone's relief. I passed rows of cubicles, tiny beige boxes meant for a false sense of privacy when actually designed for easy exposure. My dulled, carpeted footsteps carried me to the corner cubicle nestled at the far northwest corner of the floor, number 1589B. Taking another large drink from my caloric splurge, I threw my briefcase onto my desk and turned on my desktop. As the computer stirred to life, I swung around in my office chair, making several dizzying circles to the rhythm provided by my iPod. Unlike my colleagues, I refused to decorate my space with sentimental

photographs of smiling family members and of friends holding drinks at a bar. No comic strips. No artwork. All that broke the monotony was my daily Sudoku calendar sitting at a corner with a small collection of post-its, pens, pencils and highlighters. One fairly challenging puzzle a day and that was that until the next day.

“Martha? Martha. *Martha!*” I stopped mid-rotation by sticking my leg out to the desk. Looking up to see my supervisor standing over me, I jerked off my headphones and sat up. *Oops. She was wearing her black Armani suit again. She loves that suit, thinks everyone would respect her more if she’s wearing designer labels. Eh, she just looks odd today. Must have gotten a new Botox treatment. She can barely frown disapprovingly at me.*

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t hear you. Did you need something?” I suppressed a small smile threatening to surface.

“What do I need? For you to stop fooling around and to do what we pay you to do here. I need that Murphy portfolio on my desk by two.”

“Sure. By two. Got it.” I turned around and started typing until I was sure that my boss was gone. *Bitch.* I drained the last of my caffeine fix and ripped out the Sudoku puzzle for the day. When I completed my small act of defiance, I started on Citigroup’s biggest clients, the Murphys. Within hours I finished mindlessly plugging in large numbers representing the Murphy’s fortune and printed the forty-six pages. As I waited for the printer, I gnawed on one of the carrot sticks from a bag that I took from the employee lounge. I always brought in a new bag that I bought at ShopRite each week and labeled it with a black Sharpie marker: *Martha’s.*
Don’t eat.

My phone rang. “Martha Mullins speaking,” I said, balancing the black Motorola phone with my head and shoulder. I started stapling copies of my analysis together for the next meeting.

“Martha? Why haven’t you come yet? Your dad keeps asking for you. He finally woke up from the anesthesia.” My hand froze midair for a moment. I put down the unstapled packet next to the stapler and gripped the phone with such tenseness that my hand looked bloodless.

“Why is he looking for me? Isn’t Priscilla there? I’m sure she probably brought Steve and Carrie with her. That’s enough visitors for Dad.”

“Martha. Stop doing that. Just come. He loves you.” I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Love? Mom, stop trying so hard. Just let it go. Accept it. I know I have. Dad hates me. He never got over Chris and he never will.” Mom sighed loudly.

“He doesn’t... hate you. He just can’t deal with the loss of his only son. Please. Let’s just move on.”

“Mom. That was over twenty years ago. You would think the man would run out of hate. Anyway, I’m really swamped at work. I’ll call you later.”

“Martha...”

“Bye Mom.”

VI.

The icy tension hung awkwardly suspended in the air. This is one of the few times Dad and I were actually alone in a car together.

The last time we were alone, there had been silence for the entire forty-minute drive to the obligatory family dinner celebrating Mom's 58th birthday at the Four Seasons in the city. I had come home to visit from Tufts for the weekend during my junior year at college. Priscilla had been living in Manhattan at the time, working for a prestigious law firm, and she had said that she would to get to the dinner party with Mom after their *luxurious* day at *the best spa in all of New York together*. It wasn't surprising that Priscilla hadn't bothered to invite me. I never expected much from her. During that ride, I had plugged my ears with my Discman as soon as I had gotten into the Volvo and had set the volume so loud that Dad could hear the lyrics of the song that was pounding rhythmically into my brain. In response, he had turned the radio on to 106.7 and had tapped the beat of the songs lightly on the steering wheel.

Now I was stuck in the car again, having to repeat what had happened last year, with nowhere to escape, with no Discman to rescue me for the next forty minutes. I tried to avoid this day as much as I could, but Mom had to help Priscilla with some "emergency" planning for her wedding. To Priscilla, obsessed with every miniscule and mundane detail, everything regarding the big day was an "emergency," needing "urgent attention" from her bridesmaids and her mother. She liked to mention the wedding and her "Stevie" as often as possible and in every conversation she had with anyone that had an ear for her to annoy with her incessant boasting. The main target of this bragging was, of course, me, because I had been single for most of my

life. It didn't matter that I was four years younger and still a senior at college. Priscilla was constantly preoccupied with winning at anything over me, whether it was at academics – Priscilla had gone to Harvard, at the quantity of friends – I was never invited to the parties whereas Priscilla was one of the most popular girls at school, at sports – Priscilla was on the varsity field hockey team when I was the manager of the freshman softball team after getting rejected at tryouts, at jobs – I didn't have a job yet and Priscilla had landed a job as a paralegal at the biggest law firm in New York during her senior year, and now, at marital status. Priscilla never got tired of always trying to get the upper hand.

There was just no way out today. It was Dad who would drive me to my doctor's appointment; I couldn't drive myself because I was too weak from the unusually resistant flu that I had for several weeks. I was home for winter break; I tried everything to avoid staying at home for the entire month, but this flu prevented me from being able to escape at all. I was a prisoner. I was stuck.

"Martha, have you even given a thought to what I said to you earlier? Do you even care about what I have to say? I've tried to understand you, but you don't even try to understand me," her dad said with his usual coldness.

I did understand you. I really tried and I could get you better than you could ever get me. You never even came close to understanding me. I understood how much you missed Chris. But you didn't get just how much you had hurt me every single day; you either ignored me completely or you only used spiteful words to address me.

A hot tear left a moist trail on my face as it traveled down my cheeks and landed onto my sweater. A small pool had begun to soak into my collarbone through the woolly fabric. I stared

out the window away from Dad, avoiding his face, afraid that seeing it would just make me hate him more.

“Why don’t you want to become a doctor? It’s more respectable than whatever you’re studying now, isn’t it? How many times do I have to tell you what you should do? I know how this world runs better than you.” He continued to focus on driving down the Turnpike, his steely-gray eyes unflinching as the white dashes marking the lanes merge into one continuous and blurry line.

Why didn’t you know why I didn’t want to be a doctor like you wanted? Chris wanted to be a doctor. I’m not Chris and I won’t ever be able to replace him. I’m sorry I can’t. I wish he didn’t save me. He should have saved himself. Dad, I hurt too.

“I just think I should give up on you completely. If I don’t care, then I won’t keep getting hurt by everything you do. I think I just did a horrible job raising you, because you continue to disappoint me little by little, every single day.”

Haven’t you given up on me already? Why do you pretend that you care? You haven’t cared since I was six years old. You don’t know me at all. You don’t even know what I’m studying at school and why. Please just crash the car. Any physical pain would be better than how much it hurts right now.

I could just see it happening: the car speeding 105 miles per hour towards the concrete divide separating the highway. The car slams into it at just the right angle, forcing it to spin horizontally in the air at a graceful arc until it lands on its head with me and Dad trapped underneath. I am bleeding from an open gash on my head and I am unconscious. The world is still and resonates with a deafening silence.

“When you’re married, maybe you’ll understand why I’m the way I am. Try losing your child. Try having another one that won’t stop disappointing you. This is the way I am. And you can’t change me. I already said this to your mom: you can’t change the way I am. Don’t even bother trying.”

I do understand why you’re the way you are. Why can’t you see how much I have let you get away with so much already? Why can’t you see how my actions have been and always will be directly affected by you and how you treat me?

My neck was sore from being strained toward the window, so intent on trying to eliminate him from my visual periphery. My entire body was stiff and sore from the blood pounding through my head. I refused to move an inch, refused to allow him to see me cringe from his words that are being branded across my heart. I shut my eyes, feigning sleep, praying that he’d just stop.

VII.

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to youuuuu. Happy birthday dear Martha. Happy birthday toooooo... youuuuuuu!” I woke up that morning to Chris’s voice. He always tried to make my birthdays extra special, coming in first thing in the morning singing with the biggest operatic voice he could muster. He was sitting expectantly at the edge of my bed with a chocolate and vanilla Carvel cake, my name written with red frosting and a chocolate cone on top as its decor. His face was glowing to the large wax candle shaped into the age I was turning, six. “Hurry up and blow it out before it melts.” That’s what I remember the best, that big toothy smile.

I blew the candle out as fast as I could.

“Did you make a wish first?” he asked. I nodded.

“What did you wish for?” I shook my head.

“Fine. But you can’t have any cake unless you told me what you wished for,” he said.

“Not fair!” I crossed my arms over my pink ruffled pajamas, trying to stick my lips out as far as they would.

“I’m just kidding!” He tickled me lightly. “I was testing you to see if you would really tell me. Everyone knows that your wish won’t come true if you tell someone what it is.” As he placed the cake on my desk and began to cut it, his tangled brown hair fell over his teddy-bear-like hazel eyes. He was still wearing his green and blue plaid pajama pants and his worn lacrosse shirt, the one that had a hole by the neck.

“Mommy and Daddy aren’t awake? Where’s Cilla? Shouldn’t we give them some cake, too?”

“Daddy... is on another business trip and won’t be back until sometime today or tomorrow. Mommy and Cilla are still sleeping. This is our special little secret. Isn’t this the best birthday breakfast ever?” I nodded in assent. We were the best cake partners: he loved the chocolate ice cream and I loved the vanilla. We always fought for those chocolate cookie crunchies. It was our thing. “But don’t tell anyone ok? I’m going to get in trouble for giving you ice cream so early in the morning.” I closed an imaginary zipper over my lips.

“Cross my heart and hope to die!”

VIII.

I still had remnants of the crunchies from my ice cream breakfast speckled at random intervals on my face, blending in with my freckles. Chris and I had a fight that morning, trying to steal each other's crunchies. We both knew that the other had the habit of always saving them for last. I usually won, especially on my birthday. That was Chris. Always letting me have what I wanted, even if it meant giving up something he treasured. Crunchies, Pizza Hut crusts, a portion of his allowance when I spotted a new Barbie doll I wanted, his ice cream cones every time mine fell on the ground. It got to the point where he just gave them up to me before I even asked him.

Chris, Priscilla and I got into the old, white Honda Accord that he started driving around. He was taking me to my favorite place in the world. The aquarium. He tried to take me there every year as part of my present. I still had the framed photographs that the people working there took of us as soon as we entered the dome-shaped building. He said that we always needed a "souvenir for the most special little sister in the world." We stood in the same spot every year with me on Chris's back while he's holding Priscilla's hand. I have my arms wrapped tightly around his neck, smiling knowing I was in the arms of the person who would always keep me safe. The only thing that changed was the year printed on the bottom: New Jersey State Aquarium 1980, New Jersey State Aquarium 1981, New Jersey State Aquarium 1982. The one that should have been taken in 1983 was missing.

Chris and I looked at each other and sang as soon as it got to the chorus – *cause this is thriller, thriller night / There aint no second chance against the thing with forty eyes / You know its thriller, thriller night / You're fighting for your life inside of killer, thriller tonight* – the only words I knew to Michael Jackson blaring on the radio. I had learned the chorus to the song from hearing him sing it around the house.

Then, the shrill scream. The sudden pressure around my body. The sound of metal scraping. The taste of blood. Then, it was all still.

If I pieced together everything I remember, it would add up to a total of five minutes.

IX.

They thought she didn't hear them, but she did. Even though he had whispered it conspiratorially into Martha's ear, she had heard. "Let's take a picture. I want to get a souvenir for the most special little sister in the world." *Special. He said the most special.* The familiar welling of emotions built pressure in her chest, making it difficult for her to inhale. As tears began to pool in her eyes, she quickly wiped them away with the back of her hand before anyone noticed.

At first, she hadn't been aware of it. She was too young, too naïve to make such a conclusion. However, the subtle clues slowly accumulated through the years until it became blatantly obvious to her. She was an observer. She recognized things eventually. She figured out that her brother loved her sister more than he loved her. Soon after, a persistent pressure at her temples appeared as the pressure in her heart increased. *Why? Why her? Why can't I be special too? He never spends as much time with me as he does with Martha. He never takes care of me the way he does for her.* She slowly separated herself from Chris, slowly shutting herself off, not wanting to be hurt every time she saw another intimate scene between him and Martha.

"Hey silly 'Cilla! Did you space out again? Come here and get in this picture!" He had laughed as though everything was fine, as though she hadn't realized the truth. He held out his hand and faced her. For a second, she had his complete attention. His eyes were sparkling and formed into smiling half-moons. She started to smile back until she saw *her* clinging to his back.

She slid her hand into his, set her jaw firmly and managed to force a small smile right before the staff member – wearing a green polo with “New Jersey State Aquarium” stitched onto a corner – counted to three.

The three walked into the building, suddenly immersed in marine life, the exhibits giving everything a bluish hue.

“Ooh! I want to go see the penguins Chris!” Martha ran ahead to the ledge where people were peering over to see the penguins being fed. Chris ran to catch up with her and picked her up so that Martha could see better, her tiny frame still unable to reach the height of the railing. Priscilla slowly walked over and stood five feet away from them, standing on her toes, just barely able to reach the top. *This is so boring. How babyish. Only a little kid like Martha would like this.*

They slowly made their way around the exhibits, stopping and staring at the places where Martha was particularly drawn to: the colorful barrier reef displays, the sea turtles, the seals, the rainforest waterfall.

“I’m hungry,” Martha said while rubbing her stomach, her big brown eyes looking pleadingly up to Chris.

“Sure thing buddy. I was getting hungry myself! Let’s go over to the cafeteria and get some sandwiches ok?” he replied.

“Do they have ham and cheese sandwiches? Because that’s what I want.”

“I’m sure they do. Hey, Priscilla, are you hungry too? You don’t mind if we go eat now, right?” He turned around to see Priscilla standing at least five feet away. She was always a bit

quieter and more detached from the crowd. Her family teased her for being such a stereotypical middle child, an independent, moody observer.

Priscilla shrugged indifferently, looking over to the left where something caught her eye. Above the entrance to the dark tunnel read, “Shark Realm. Enter if you dare.”

“OK guys, let’s go! I’m starving for some pizza.”

As Chris and Martha headed over to the Feeding Frenzy Café hand-in-hand, Priscilla slowly backed away and ran into the entrance of the dark tunnel. After walking several feet into the black cave-like opening, she gasped as soon as she stepped out into the bright glass tunnel. All around her, sharks of every kind were swimming and she felt like she could almost touch them. All that kept her separated from them was a pane of glass. Looking at the walls and up at the domed ceiling, Priscilla was transfixed by the white underbellies, the wide span of the triangular fins, the curved mouth with the visible rows of sharp teeth.

“Sharks have teeth that are not attached to the jaw, like you or me, but are embedded in the flesh. These teeth are constantly replaced throughout the sharks’ life, some losing up to 30,000 teeth in their lifetime!”

Priscilla turned around to see an overenthusiastic tour guide leading a group of families, all staring open-mouthed at the sharks swimming around them. He was gesturing emphatically, his shark-tooth necklace swinging like a pendulum as he turned to point at a gray shark nearby.

“Just look at these magnificent creatures! This here is a hammerhead shark. They have elongated snouts and a special membrane that protects the eyes during an attack.”

“Is that why sharks have a lot of teeth? To eat people?” A small child, close in age to Martha, gripped his dad’s hands tighter and stared wide-eyed up at his parents.

The guide, hearing the kid's frightened whisper, responded, "Shark attacks on humans are extremely rare. They only attack when provoked or when they mistake a human as a prey. Movies like *Jaws* has totally ruined the image of sharks, portraying them to be flesh-hungry monsters. These sharks are fed by hand by scuba divers everyday! Actually, if anyone is interested, you can swim with the sharks with our cast. For a mere 165 dollars, anyone over 12 years of age can experience these beauties personally. Please ask me or the information center if you have any questions. Now moving onto the Jules Verne Gallery..."

The tour guide's voice faded as an announcement crackled over the intercom. "We are looking for a nine-year-old female with straight, blonde hair. She is wearing a black T-shirt with a black windbreaker, long denim jeans, and black Keds sneakers. If anyone knows the whereabouts of this child, please call the information desk at extension 9911 or find a staff member immediately. Thank you."

Parents instinctively drew their children closer to them, their hands tightening around their shoulders or their hands. Priscilla started feeling as though people were staring at her, analyzing her: her black T-shirt, her black windbreaker, her black Keds sneakers, her jeans. Adding up these clues, they began to realize that she was the missing girl, Priscilla ran toward the end of the tunnel, pushing them aside until she had reached the Jules Verne Gallery. She found a corner where a brown rectangular trash can was placed in the shadow and sat down to catch her breath. After several minutes had passed, she walked resolutely past the cerulean waters filled with tropical fish and an octopus with its tentacles suctioned to the glass pane. She walked with blinders on her eyes, refusing to look at the periphery, until she found the information desk.

“I’m here. I’m found,” she said to the officer standing to the side of the desk filled with glossy pamphlets and copies of maps.

“Priscilla Mullins! Where were you? You scared us half to death! Thank God you’re OK,” said Chris who had been standing to the side talking to another police officer when he noticed her at the desk. He squatted on his legs and squeezed her middle so hard she could barely squeeze her breaths into her body. She closed her eyes and a hot tear escaped her eye. For that moment, it was just her and her brother. It was just the two of them grateful for finding each other again. *This is the way it was before Martha came along. This is the way it’s supposed to be.*

“Are you OK? ‘Cilla, we were so scared. I thought someone bad took you away forever,” her voice sliced through the moment like ice skates carving its path on newly-formed ice. She felt a small tug at her jacket and looked down to find Martha’s tear-stained cheeks pressed against her left leg. Chris finally let go, but Martha was still stuck to her. An involuntary shiver ran down her leg. She was still there, an awkward, permanent extension to her body.

X.

The men were still digging through the frozen earth. The earth wasn't ready, caught by surprise by the arrival of its soon-to-be addition to its collection. They should have been done by then but the grave kept on filling with water on the bottom, apparently a common problem in the winter. We couldn't put him in there like that. The grave had to be perfect. It wasn't a hole. Don't call it a hole. It was a grave. It was Chris's grave, his new home. The skies were gray. The sun had refused to fight through the dense layer of clouds. The wind cut through our coats, rendering them useless, our bodies naked to the raw elements. With each burst of wind, light, powdery flurries were kicked up from the several inches of snow that had fallen the night before. These particles settled on the dark oak coffin like a light layer of dust, making the raised on the lid a delicate etching.

Everyone stood in silence around the gravediggers. Waiting. Mom, Dad, 'Cilla, Grandma Mary, Grandpa Jack, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Rick, Grandma Michelle. His friends, classmates, teachers, and baseball team had all left after the service, each clutching each other with damp tissues in hand and overflowing from their pockets. "He was such an amazing person;" "He is in heaven now, in peace;" "It was too sudden;" "He was always so full of life;" "He was too young;" "That accident was such a tragedy." Only sympathetic looks and tears were used to look at us today and only the past tense was used to talk about him. He already

ceased to exist in people's lives. That's what the past tense does. It reduces a person down to a memory.

The marble headstone was already there at the head of the grave. Waiting. There was such a finality in seeing it there, waiting to fulfill its role as a person's last form of identification. He really wasn't going to come back, jumping up from behind the counter screaming, "Just kidding!" He wasn't going to throw his head back with his hearty laugh, overcome with the success of his practical joke. He wasn't going to run around the counter in circles, avoiding our attempts to catch him. He was gone.

Above the epitaph was a carving of an hourglass – "the swiftness of time," the funeral director had told my parents.



In Loving Memory Of

Christopher David Mullins, Jr.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

May 21 1965 – February 2 1983

The diggers finally climbed out. The priest prayed.

*The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name' sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou annointest my head with oil; My cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.*

They lowered the coffin into the ground. My mom cried. My dad held her. Priscilla sobbed softly to herself. I stared at the wooden box that held my brother. We all stepped up to the edge and tossed in a white rose. *Chris, I miss you. I'll always miss you. You're the best brother in the world, my cake partner.* I kissed my rose and watched it join the top of the pile. Dad had to help Mom take a shovel of dirt and put it into the grave. We each took our turn watching our piece of earth swirl for a second before it went back where it belonged.

XI.

Cranford Twp Police Station

Police Report Filed February 2, 1983

5:14pm

Location: Union Hospital

Officer Roger Edwards

Victim: Martha Mullins

Roger: Hi Martha. My name is Officer Roger Edwards. But you can call me Roger if you want.

Martha: Hi Roger.

Roger: I'm just going to ask you some questions. Is that alright?

Martha: OK.

Roger: How old are you Martha?

Martha: Six. Today's my birthday. See? That's how many fingers I am now.

Roger: Oh, well, happy birthday!

Martha: Thank you.

Roger: Where were you going today?

Martha: To the aquarium.

Roger: Who did you go with?

Martha: With my brother Chris and my sister Priscilla. We all go every year for my birthday. It's part of Chris's present for me. It's part of my special treat every single year.

Roger: That's a great present! Sweetheart, could you tell me exactly what you remember from the time you got into the car at your house until the time when the accident happened? It's ok if it takes you a little time to remember. It's been a crazy day for you. Take all the time you need.

Martha: In the morning, after breakfast, we got into the car and I sat next to Chris in the front. He helped me buckle my seatbelt because it got stuck. Priscilla sat in the back behind Chris and she buckled her seatbelt by herself.

Roger: And did your brother look really tired? Was he upset? Or angry?

Martha: No. We were all very happy. Chris and I had cake for breakfast so he had a lot of energy from the ice cream. But please don't tell my mom. We're not allowed to have sweets before lunchtime.

Roger: Don't worry, I'll make sure that stays a secret between us. And then what happened after you buckled your seatbelts?

Martha: We were just driving and talking and listening to music on the radio. Chris and I love the song "Thriller." We always sing it together. When it came onto the radio, we sang it really loud. Do you know it?

Roger: Yes, I do. I happen to like it myself. Do you remember the car crash? Did it happen as you were singing or right after? Was there something that made your brother look away from the road and distracted him?

Martha: No. When I try really hard to think about what happened, my brain can't remember. It's all black.

Roger: So you don't remember anything at all about the accident or the ambulance?

Martha: No.

Roger: So what do you remember next?

Martha: I woke up and I was in the hospital on a bed and Mommy was touching my hair and she was crying. And I asked her why she was crying and she said that Chris was really hurt and that he didn't make it. I didn't understand but then Priscilla told me.

Roger: I'm so sorry that you had to go through all of this bad stuff on your birthday. Do you have any questions for me?

Martha: No. It's ok.

Roger: OK darling. Thank you so much for talking with me today. You're a very brave little girl.

XII.

Cranford Twp Police Station

Police Report Filed February 2, 1983

5:35pm

Location: Union Hospital

Officer Thomas Powell

Victim: Priscilla Mullins

Thomas: Hi Priscilla. I'm Officer Thomas Powell. Please call me Tommy. How are you doing? I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about the accident?

Priscilla: Sure.

Thomas: First of all, how are you feeling? It looks like you got some bumps and bruises there.

Priscilla: I'm fine, thank you. The nurse put some medicine where I hit my head.

Thomas: Are you in any pain at all? Should I come back later to ask you questions?

Priscilla: No. I'm OK. My neck is a little sore, but it's not a big deal.

Thomas: Great. You're so strong. So, who were you in the car today?

Priscilla: Martha and Chris.

Thomas: Your brother and your sister?

Priscilla: Yes.

Thomas: Why? Where were you guys going?

Priscilla: To the aquarium.

Thomas: Why were going there today?

Priscilla: For Martha's birthday. He always takes her there. Every year. They let me go with them.

Thomas: Sounds like a good brother.

Priscilla: Sure. He is, especially to Martha, because she's the baby in our family.

Thomas: So what happened after you got into the car?

Priscilla: We buckled our seatbelts - I sat in the back behind Chris and Martha sat in the front next to him - and then he started driving.

Thomas: Do you remember the accident?

Priscilla: I remember everything. Chris and Martha started to sing their stupid song when it came on the radio.

Thomas: What song?

Priscilla: Thriller. So dumb.

Thomas: Was Chris looking at Martha and not at the road? Did he get distracted or did the car just suddenly lose control? What happened exactly?

Priscilla: They were singing that song when it came on the radio. Actually, they were just screaming. That doesn't count as singing. And then the car, all of a sudden, moved to the right really fast. Chris tried to hold onto the wheel and try to make the car go back left onto the road. When the car wasn't moving where it should, I screamed really loud because I was scared but he just leaned over and hugged Martha. He didn't even look back to see if I was OK.

Thomas: So Chris leaned over to cover Martha when the car lost control?

Priscilla: Yeah. That's what I said. He didn't even want to take care of me. So then, the car hit a big pile of snow really hard and my head bumped the seat in front of me and then the car was upside down. It's a good thing we had our seatbelts on. And then I felt blood on my face. And then I screamed but Chris and Martha didn't hear me. They didn't move or say anything for a long time. Then, an ambulance came and rescued us and took us to this hospital. Then, our parents came and they were crying and I told them what happened.

Thomas: You're such a brave little girl.

Priscilla: I'm not little. I'm a big girl. Martha's the little girl.

Thomas: Well, thank you very much for answering my questions. You're a big help because we need to know exactly what happened. I'll take you back to your parents now.

Priscilla: You're welcome. You can ask me anytime. I remember everything.

XIII.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God! Honey, come here.” Mom ran into the emergency room with her beige car coat flying simultaneously in all directions behind her. Her hair was haphazardly thrown up into a ponytail, pieces of stray blonde strands poking out and glowing like a mane in the hospital’s harsh fluorescent light. She had Priscilla wrapped tightly around her and was stroking her hair tenderly quietly whispering, “Oh my God. Oh my God,” completely at a loss for words. Black mascara had run into pools below her eyes, volcanic soil lining the perimeter of an icy-blue lake. Dad stood by and wiped a tear from his eyes before it could well up and spill over the edge of his eyelids.

She finally managed to ask, “Are you OK? Are you in a lot of pain? Look at those bruises.”

Priscilla shook her head. “I’m fine Mom. The nurse gave me medicine.”

“Where’s Martha?” Mom asked suddenly realizing that the rest of her kids weren’t within her immediate reach. Priscilla twisted her face and merely pointed to the nearest cot where Martha was still sleeping.

“Oh, thank God you girls are OK,” she sighed a sigh of relief. “I don’t know what I would have done if I’d lost you in that accident! You kids are everything to me. I never want you to leave me. Ever.” She tightened her grip around Priscilla again, burying her face into the

nest of Priscilla's hair, not too unlike hers, straight, blonde and highlighted naturally by the sun's rays.

Suddenly, Mom pulled herself away from Priscilla. She looked around her with a look of a cornered wild animal about to do something desperate to escape its hungry prey. "Where's Chris? I don't see him anywhere!" She ran to the nearest nurse checking the vitals and the IV of a nearby patient. "Where's my son? Why isn't he with my daughters? Christopher Mullins. He has to be here somewhere."

"Excuse me ma'am, please check the front desk and ask the nurse at the station. I don't know where your son is. I'm so sorry. Please give them a description of your son and all relevant information and they will be able to help you."

"Of all the incompetent..." Mom started to mutter under her breath as she sprinted to the station window. "Excuse me? Excuse me. I need to find my son. Do you know where he is? Why isn't anyone telling me anything here?"

"Honey, calm down. They're doing the best they can. I'm sure he went to go to the bathroom or something. We'll find him soon enough," Dad said, trying to soothe Mom's hysterical outburst. He grabbed her hand with both of his and looked into her eyes. It was the first time he had held her hand in years. "It's all going to be alright. Ok?"

"Ok," she responded, visibly relaxing with his support. "Let's just find Chris so I can relax and we can go home. I want us all go to home right now."

“Excuse me? Are you Mr. and Mrs. Mullins?” A nurse at the desk looked sympathetically at Mom and Dad while holding a gray folder.

“Yes. Do you know where our son is?” asked Mom.

“They hadn’t told you anything about the accident when you were first contacted? Nothing at all?”

“No... Why? Is there something we should know? Oh my God! Chris is in surgery, isn’t he? He is, isn’t he? How bad is it? Is he in pain? How much longer is it going to take?” Mom looked like she was going to faint at any minute. Dad gripped her arm tightly, supporting her.

“No. Mr. and Mrs. Mullins, I’m so sorry to have to give you this news myself. I thought you were told sooner. I’m so sorry, but your son, Christopher, did not make it,” said the nurse.

“Wait. What do you *mean* he didn’t MAKE IT? I WANT MY SON. WHERE IS HE?” Mom was gesturing emphatically around the emergency room. Other families waiting for news of their loved ones turned to see where the screaming was coming from, glad it wasn’t them receiving such terrible news. “DO YOU MEAN HE DIDN’T MAKE IT TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM? IS HE STILL IN HIS CAR? TELL ME NOW YOUNG LADY! DON’T PLAY GAMES WITH ME! BECAUSE IF HE’S STILL IN HIS CAR, WE NEED TO GET HIM RIGHT NOW!”

“Mrs. Mullins, please. I’m so sorry.”

“DON’T TELL ME YOU’RE SORRY! JUST TELL ME WHERE I CAN FIND MY SON AND YOU CAN STOP APOLOGIZING!” Dad stood there with a blank stare, rooted to the spot. He was still holding Mom’s arm, but was now lacking its initial strength and confident support.

“Your son, Chris... He, he was found dead at the scene of the accident. The paramedics couldn’t do anything for him. He was already gone by the time they got there. I’m so sorry. We need you to identify his body downstairs. Let me page Dr. Stevens and he can explain in more depth about what had happened and why they weren’t able to resuscitate him. Your daughters Priscilla and Martha do not know what happened to their brother. We thought it best for their parents to explain what is going on. They’re probably still in shock and cannot fully comprehend the situation.” Nancy slowly turned around and picked up the phone. After dialing some numbers, she turned back to face the stunned parents and said, “Dr. Stevens will be here shortly. Again, I’m so sorry.”

Mom collapsed to the linoleum floor and started to cry uncontrollably, her whole body shaking. “NO! MY BABY! I CAN’T LOSE MY BABY! OH MY GOD! WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? OH MY GOD! MY POOR BABY!” Suddenly, she stood up, shaking her head in disbelief. “No. I don’t believe her. There has to be some mistake.”

Dad grabbed Mom’s left elbow and supported her as she went back over to where Priscilla had been watching her parents. They didn’t know she had heard everything. She knew. She knew that her only brother was dead.

“Priscilla? Honey? Can you tell Mommy and Daddy everything that happened? We need to know everything you can remember, OK?” Mom kneeled on the ground, pleading for more information, for some hope that the hospital had made a huge mistake, for confirmation that this was all a terrible nightmare.

Priscilla nodded.

Lurking. “Well, we got into the car and put on our seatbelts, just like you always tell us to do. Then, we were driving to the aquarium when...”

Provocation. The notes of “Thriller” drifted into her memory. The way they had turned to each other, smiling and singing. The way they looked like they were sharing a secret, a secret that had always excluded her.

Attack. “Well, I’m not saying it was Martha’s fault. She didn’t mean it. But she and Chris were singing this song that came on the radio and she suddenly grabbed his arm. I think maybe she wanted to dance or something. Then, the car flew to the right and we hit the snow and the car flipped over.”